

In the Shadow of the Oracle

*Religion as Politics in a
Suriname Maroon Society*



H. U. E. Thoden van Velzen
W. van Wetering

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Gaan Tata's carry oracle (Diitabiki, 1962).

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Edited and Introduced by Dirk van der Elst



Long Grove, Illinois

For
Baa Andele (André J. F. Köbben)
and Da Asawooko,
two great teachers

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Cover photo: The main carry oracle of the Ogii tradition, one of the two religious regimes that are the subject of the book.

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Acknowledgments

Instead of spreading our interest equally over the many facets of the rich culture of Suriname's Ndyuka Maroons, from the beginning of our fieldwork our attention turned to the Gaan Tata (pronounced GAAN Tátá) oracle. Although there was no place for Outsiders at the oracle, whether these Outsiders were black or white, we had a genuine desire to be present when the oracle was consulted. It acted as a magnet, drawing us to its priests and their ritual proceedings, and being forbidden to attend the oracular sessions gave our interest an obsessive quality. When we were finally permitted to be in the presence of Gaan Tata, our research interests had found their subject. Bonno Thoden van Velzen wrote an academic thesis on the oracle as the supreme political institution of the Ndyuka; Ineke van Wetering focused on Ndyuka witchcraft and the role of the oracle in combating it. The theses were defended at the University of Amsterdam in 1966 and 1973 respectively.

Our work during those early years was part of a larger project that entailed no less than a comprehensive study of the various ethnic groups of contemporary Suriname society. Its *auctor intellectualis* was the late R. A. J. (Rudi) van Lier, whose "Frontier Society: A Social History of Surinam" had redirected the attention of anthropologists and historians to Suriname. André Köbben took charge of the Maroon part and selected the Ndyuka of eastern Suriname as a focus for study. André has been a great teacher, suggesting interesting aspects of Maroon culture worthy of study, firing our imagination, but without interfering with what we were exactly doing.

We are grateful for the generous support received from the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO), then called WOSUNA (Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Suri-

name Nederlandse Antillen). The several stints of fieldwork we completed during the 1970s and 1980s were financially supported by the University of Utrecht. Ineke van Wetering gratefully acknowledges a donation from the Treub Maatschappij for her research in 1991.

It is almost obligatory for anthropologists to thank the people who live where the fieldwork was conducted. We would be glad to do that, after all dozens of Ndyuka in various villages along the Tapanahoni have been extremely kind for us, and we felt at home in Ndyuka society. Yet we feel that such a widespread show of gratitude is a distortion of what really happened. When we first came to Suriname, almost everybody was opposed to our research. "Nothing personal," people might have thought, "but why do we need Outsiders poking in our business?" And of course, they had every reason to feel that way.

Opposition to our work, nearly universal in the beginning, began to weaken as time wore on and as we continued to return to the Tapanahoni River. But even today, resistance has not completely disappeared. Let us therefore remember those individuals who actually assisted us. Foremost among them was Gaanman (Paramount Chief) Akontu Velanti who, after a few months, invited us to his oracle. Once he had taken the considerable risk of allowing two Outsiders to be present when the oracle of Gaan Tata was consulted, others followed. His son, Da Akuden Velanti, helped us in many ways to understand Ndyuka religion. In the early phase of our fieldwork we recall him remarking to us one day: "If some people would know what I am telling you now, they would try to kill me." Despite the fears, after a few months we had found people in several Tapanahoni villages who were willing to tell us about the history of their clan or village, or they would make a start in explaining parts of their key institutions, such as healing and funerary ritual.

After about six months of fieldwork, we became friendly with Da Asawooko, who proved to be an invaluable source of information on Ndyuka religion and history. Asawooko was certainly not the generally supportive informant that so often figures in the acknowledgments of anthropologists. He was a kind but stern teacher who made it clear in no uncertain terms when he was displeased with our progress. We suppose that Asawooko would disagree with those pioneers of anthropological research who laid down the rule that eighteen or twenty-four months is the classic period of fieldwork and that anything more than that is fine but not really essential. Asawooko considered the study of his culture to be worth a lifetime of travail. Asawooko was a good teacher, presenting each bit of information with commentary about its antecedents. He would, for instance, discriminate carefully between events he himself had witnessed and those he had heard about from others. Asawooko was used to examining all information critically; it mattered little to him whether these were sto-

ries of the ancestors' great deeds or a bit of recent village gossip. He discussed his sources and the veracity of each snippet of information in the light of insights already gained.

Da Amadiyu, a gentleman excelling in courteous, diplomatic behavior expected of Ndyuka men who are over thirty years of age, introduced us to the fineries of Ndyuka vernacular, rhetoric, and culture. Da Akalali, prophet of the Ogii cult, and therefore a partisan in religious disputes, surprised us with historical accounts of past religious strife that were encompassing and objective. Da Kasiayeki, although lamenting his failing memory, proved to be a reliable authority on eighteenth-century Ndyuka history. We learned about the origins of the Gaan Tata cult from two of the founder's grandchildren, Da Amatali and Da Amoikudu. Having lost most his teeth, Amatali was difficult to understand, but with the help of Ndyuka friends, we managed to write down the wonderful stories he had heard from his grandfather, Da Labi Agumasaka (ca. 1825–1914). During the 1970s we often met Amoikudu at Albina, where he lived in makeshift shelters among heaps of households refuse. When he understood that we were seriously interested in this history of the Gaan Tata cult, he stopped acting the part of the eccentric and narrated complex accounts full of colorful detail about life in Ndyuka society around the turn of the century. Especially helpful, too, were a few Ndyuka historians, busily engaged in gathering historical knowledge themselves. We wish to mention Baa Bono of Diitabiki and Baa (André) Pakosie, both passionately interested in their own culture and its history. André, now a Captain of all Ndyuka living in the Netherlands, told us some of the most striking parts of the Ogii myths. We are deeply grateful for his many contributions.

We would like to end this part of our acknowledgments by emphasizing that none of our teachers should be held responsible for the end result of our work.

We are extremely grateful to Dirk van der Elst who first acted as our broker with Waveland Press, and then patiently, paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence, converted our Anglo-Dutch into American English. For him it meant months of work, for us it was a joy to see our text begin "to sing." What we especially appreciated about Dirk is that he construed his role as more than that of an editor; he also, on the basis of his fieldwork among the Kwinti Maroons of the early 1970s, was willing to ask challenging questions, never sparing us his criticism if he felt it was needed. After Dirk had finished, Jeni Ogilvie at Waveland Press took over and became our second editor. What we especially liked about her role were the many questions she put to us, showing her interest in the text by indicating areas where more information would be welcome. Chapter 17, "Doing Anthropology among the Ndyuka," has been completely rewritten as a result of her questions and gentle prodding.

Thanks of a different nature goes to those colleagues who read earlier versions of our manuscript and assisted us in various ways. Silvia W. de Groot generously allowed us to choose from her many photos and slides to illustrate this book. Wim Hoogbergen shared with us his vast knowledge of the Dutch archives on Suriname. It was through his good offices that we managed to link a Maroon bounty hunter of the 1830s with Dikii, one of the key players in Ndyuka history. Finally we would like to stress our indebtedness to our friend Stephan Palmié who used a considerable part of the time we spent together by telling us what excited him about the work of our colleagues. These conversations took place in trains, during long walks, or at our places in the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States. It was Stephan who encouraged us to go ahead with this project and see to it that the stories woven around Da Labi Agumasaka, first High Priest of the Gaan Tata cult, would be given a place in our book—a place that corresponds with his significance for Suriname Maroon history.

On Suriname's Maroons

An Introduction by Dirk van der Elst

This is a book about witches and possession cults, about polytheistic priests and iconoclastic prophets, about magic as a cottage industry in a modernizing Afro-American society. It relates the world of the Ndyuka, a tribe of 50,000+ descendants of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century runaway African slaves in Suriname. It names the major innovators in the 300-year-long process of evolving and adjusting the belief system that structures their reality and their options, and thereby every other aspect of their culture.

In 1760, the Ndyuka were the first of six black tribes to be recognized by the Dutch colonial government. Their genesis lies in groups of Runaways who collected in the river system of eastern Suriname around 1710. Collectively these free black peoples were referred to (until the advent of "political correctness") as Bush Negroes. In their homelands they still call themselves *Businengee* or *Businingre* (from the Dutch *Bosnegers*, "Forest Negroes"). But the term Maroon, or Mar-ron, is now preferred for the entire range of slave-founded free societies in the New World.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge in cultural anthropology is almost all based upon ethnographic fieldwork, that is, on descriptions and interpretations writ-

ten by social anthropologists who spent long periods, often years, living among the people whose culture is the subject of their study. H. U. E. (Bonno) Thoden van Velzen and W. (Ineke) van Wetering have made the usual contributions to the general ethnography of the Ndyuka, but this particular publication is unique in the vast (but mainly non-English) literature on the Maroons of Suriname. For almost 250 years, missionaries, government officials, and anthropologists have reported on these tribes, and more than a dozen modern ethnographies have been written about them. Nevertheless, of all the outsiders who have ever worked among the Suriname Maroons, only two, Bonno Thoden van Velzen and his wife Ineke van Wetering, have actually witnessed and recorded a witch eradication movement and have been able to scrutinize Maroon oracles at work. Native religious regimes have traditionally dominated social and political activity in Suriname's interior. *In the Shadow of the Oracle* is the first examination of the *Gaan Tata* (Great Father) oracle, the most prominent of all Maroon oracles, and of its tightly organized priesthood. It is also the first publication to describe the politics and procedures of witch suppression.

The depth of this book's ideational research is also unique: the authors pursue the origins of these regimes to their root assumptions, the "givens" upon which the rest of culture (history, art, kinship, folklore, belief, technology, diet, warfare, etc.) is based, the "axioms" from which Ndyuka theologies and institutions developed. This is not general practice in ethnographies because core ideological principles are everywhere so *literally* self-evident to the people who hold them that they are very difficult to talk about—for the people themselves as well as for their ethnographers. In practice this means that most fieldwork does not last long enough to establish the intellectual perspective and personal trust from informants that discussing such matters requires; researchers risk running out of time and money before they have accumulated enough data to justify their efforts and their grants. It also implies something every anthropologist knows but that others may find intellectually discomfiting: that most straightforward ethnographic accounts are necessarily incomplete and therefore misleading because they do not—*cannot*—deal critically with the most fundamental explanations for why the society under discussion differs from the reader's.

A good descriptive ethnography of symbolic forms must go beyond the natives' point of view and beyond the surface reality of everyday understandings. Consequently good ethnography must disturb, shock or jolt us into an awareness that we did not have before. This sense of surprise is quite different from the *offense* that bad ethnography so often exudes. For this reason, the generality of native informants may not comprehend or even sympathize with the ethnographic representation of their life-forms. (Obeyesekere 1990:224)

When local oracle priests—the most powerful group of men in a Maroon society—object to being studied (as they do reflexively), the prudent ethnographer usually switches to Plan B and studies some other, more attainable subject—often brilliantly. Your authors here, however, have invested the necessary time to overcome such ingrained distrust: they have studied Ndyuka religiosity for four decades, that is, for their entire academic careers.

The communication of the results of ethnographic fieldwork is always and necessarily an intensely personal and challenging effort: in no other field are writers expected to explain *from the natives' point of view* why they believe and do such-and-such. Moreover, when one's findings have to be presented in a tongue other than one's usual professional language, that makes for double translation. Since the authors are Dutch but wrote this book in English, part of my editorial task has been to make their English sound more American. I was chosen for this because I, too, am an anthropologist with fieldwork experience among Suriname's Maroons, and can read and speak Dutch.

THE RELEVANCE OF MAGIC AND WITCHCRAFT

For me, as a psychologically oriented cultural anthropologist, perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this work is the insights it offers into how cultures structure perception. It is a truism in anthropology and psychology (*vide* the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) that each culture (including yours and mine) is based upon a unique and characteristic set of unverifiable propositions about the universe, society, and the individual.

The Ndyuka, like many non-Westerners and all Maroons, do not believe in accident. They believe instead that willful human beings are responsible for the evil outcomes of good (or at least well-intentioned) plans and behavior, and for what Westerners would consider illness, bad luck, or even "acts of God." This is a common phenomenon in pre-industrial societies. What makes the Ndyuka distinctive even among Maroons, however, is their enduring belief in the omnipresence of an Almighty Evil. They take it for granted that many if not most of their tribal fellows are secretly malevolent beyond redemption, because most human beings are simply too weak to reject temptation. Those who have forsaken their humanity by magically harming or killing others are called *wisiman*, a term that is roughly translatable as "witch(es)."¹ For the Ndyuka, *wisi* (witchcraft) is the single most important explanation for the tragedies and disappointments that befall every human life. In this they differ from Suriname's other Maroons, always in degree and often in kind.

Unavoidably, whenever anthropologists publish what they have learned of native belief systems, the natives feel threatened. Yet, as the earlier quote by Gananath Obeyesekere made clear, not saying

these things out of some desire to "spare their feelings" would be bad ethnography, and inexcusably misleading. In this context it is relevant to note that the authors have been honored by the Congress of Maroon Organizations in the Netherlands with the 1994 Marron Award "for their contributions to the study and welfare of Maroon societies."

The following chapters show how the fear of wisi shapes Ndyuka responses to the challenges of change, how it affects their organization and their individual potentials, and how it both limits their collective alternatives and protects their tribe from some of the pernicious influences of the West. The Ndyuka also believe that there are supernatural beings who will help them, and others who wish them ill, and that both can be manipulated for private or communal benefit. Since these beliefs are woven throughout their culture, the Ndyuka present perhaps the ultimate example of what it means for a society *not* to separate church and state.

The anthropological term "culture shock" has now entered everyday language. You may experience it in reading this book. You will know that you have it if (or when) it makes you wonder whether the authors and you are being made patsies in some elaborate tribal joke. Most immigrants, in every society, will recognize such moments of disbelief. Probably every ethnographer remembers moments where he or she wondered: "Are the natives putting me on? Is this some giant conspiracy?" And to be sure, on any fieldwork some of the locals will try to steer the ethnographer on a snipe hunt, now and then, for fun or profit. But not all of them, not all the time, not under all circumstances, not perfectly, not for all the years the authors of this book have spent living among the Ndyuka, alone or together, and interviewed and discussed their findings with Ndyuka living in the Netherlands.

SURINAME HISTORY

Suriname is the name for the central one of the non-Latino Guianas on the north coast of South America. Today it is a politically independent nation of nearly half a million people that covers a territory almost as large as the U.S. state of Washington or Oklahoma. It is mostly tropical rain forest cut by rivers running from south (the mountainous border with Brazil) to north (the sea-level, alluvial coast), and lies between 2 and 6 degrees above the equator. Like all tropical countries it is hot, humid, and lushly verdant due to heavy rainfall. Suriname's main population groups, in order of size, are Hindustani, Creoles, Javanese, Maroons, and Amerindians. The first and third groups descend from immigrants invited into the colony as plantation workers after the repeal of slavery in 1863. Suriname's history has been minutely recorded in Dutch (e.g., Hartsinck 1770, Wolbers 1861, van Lier 1971, Janssen 1986, van Stipriaan 1993, and Buddingh

1995), but English-language histories are cursory and limited. Here I will only mention some highlights.

Because of the primitive state of navigation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Suriname lay on the impossible-to-determine border between Spain's America and Portugal's, and was therefore long considered not worth investing in by either nation. Sensing opportunity (this part of the Guianas was "known" to be where El Dorado, the mythical city of the Golden Man, was located), small groups of Dutch, English, and French colonists occasionally attempted settlements. Although these usually did not survive even a single year, they did provide their nations later with the precedents needed to excuse carving the non-Hispanic Guianas into an English, a Dutch, and a French possession. So while new colonies flourished in the Caribbean and on South America's mainland, Suriname's awakening awaited the publication in 1595 of Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Bewtiful Empyre of Gviana." This feloniously enthusiastic description of a fetid, low coast infested with marshes, mangrove swamps, and hostile Indians (Dragtenstein [2002:23] estimates there were over 30,000) nearly convinced the Pilgrims to move to Suriname instead of Massachusetts. After Raleigh's work became popular, several European nations did attempt colonies there, but every settlement was either overwhelmed by the local Indians or pillaged and burned by European rivals. Until 1650. Then Francis Lord Willoughby of Parham moved to the Wild Coast, where in 1651 he founded Willoughbyland with a hundred colonists, slaves, and indentured laborers.

But earlier, in 1621, the States General of the United Netherlands had granted the newly formed West India Company (WIC) the right to operate colonies in its American and African possessions for 24 years (Menkman 1953). In 1623, the WIC founded New Netherland, a North American colony that comprised mainly today's Hudson Valley plus Long Island. Uncontested Dutch rule of Suriname dates from 1667 when, at the end of the Second Dutch-English War (1665–1667), the British traded Suriname for New Netherland, whose major city, Nieuw Amsterdam, they renamed New York.

In 1682 Suriname was bought from the Dutch states of Zeeland for 260,000 guilders by a mercantile consortium consisting of the WIC, the City of Amsterdam, and the family Van Aerssen van Sommelsdijck, whose patriarch actually moved to Suriname to be the colony's new governor, to make an end to the Indian war, to lay out new plantations, and to assure the steady supply of slaves (EvS:234).

Until well into the eighteenth century, Suriname remained a colony of this odd triumvirate. Thereafter it was a possession of the Netherlands (except between 1799 and 1816, when it came under the control of the English). Its sole reason for being was the profit in sugar and coffee. Whenever that diminished (as when the Amsterdam stock

market crashed in 1773), interest in Suriname waned. By the middle of the twentieth century, books and articles about the colony talked about "the forgotten land," and Dutch taxpayers grew tired of supporting Suriname's dependent economy. In 1975 the country was more or less forced into independence.

SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE

From its inception, the colony was a voracious consumer of slaves. The inhumane working conditions, exacerbated by the epidemic diseases and dangers in the marshy tropical lowlands, almost guaranteed early death. That rapid turnover in the workforce led to an insatiable demand for replacements. By 1675, the continuous importation of slaves had been ensured, and plantations grew into large-scale agro-industries, producing goods for the world market. The conditions of slavery (as measured in life expectancy) actually worsened, not least because the entire colony was run for and by absentee owners and planners. Interaction between workers and management grew even more remote as plantations increased in size and declined in number. In 1688, there were 23 plantations with 564 slaves; fifty years later there were 430 plantations with 50,000+ slaves. That seems to have been the upper limit; in 1787 there were 45,000 slaves on 452 plantations, and in 1830, 48,784 slaves on 370 plantations. At emancipation there were 36,484 slaves on 210 plantations (van Lier 1971:27-31).

The Dutch were involved in an Eighty-Year War with Spain and Portugal (1568-1648), then the foremost slavers in the Western world. When the Eighty-Year War ended, so had the international dominance of Spain and Portugal, and the Dutch boasted the largest merchant fleet in Europe, which was to stand them in good stead in their drive for profitable trade. Initially, the Dutch slave trade was an incidental by-product of the war with Spain and Portugal. But after 1621, when the WIC was chartered to bring sugar and profits to Protestant Europe, the New World's planters needed a dependable workforce. In 1633 the WIC captured and colonized the entire northeastern corner of Brazil. During the same period, some 20,000 slaves were brought into that territory, after the Dutch captured the Portuguese slave port of Elmina on Africa's Gold Coast. A generation later, when the Portuguese drove the Dutch out of Brazil in 1654, the WIC recentered the slave trade on Curaçao.

For a century after expelling the Portuguese from the coasts of Africa, Holland dominated the American slave trade. In 1640 Portugal, which under papal decree controlled the coasts of Africa and was therefore America's main supplier of slaves, separated itself from Spain. This made Spanish plantations in the Americas dependent on the enemy Hollanders for their labor force, and in 1662 the Spanish

crown legalized the slave trade with its former adversaries. The next year the English and the French also entered the trade in Africans. By 1730, Suriname's Paramaribo had become the most important slave market in South America. But the Dutch were unable to maintain themselves in Africa. In 1740, the Dahomeans drove them from their last trading post on the Slave Coast (Emmer 1977:560).

One measure of the severity of plantation slavery is its effect on natural population increase. Over the last half century there has been a plethora of postulates about the actual number of slaves imported from Africa to the New World. Postma's investigations (1990:187, 212) on the slaves brought to Suriname between 1668 and 1803 put their numbers at roughly 180,000. From 1803 until 1830 another 22,000 African slaves reached the colony (van Stipriaan 1993:102). From 1830 (the British began enforcing their prohibition of the slave trade in 1833) until 1863 (the year of the abolition of slavery) very few slaves were brought to Suriname (Oostindie 2003). So the total number of Africans brought to Suriname was at least 202,000. There were 36,484 slaves on the day before Emancipation and 16,479 Freed Negroes (van Stipriaan 1993:311, 314), and another 8,000 Treaty Maroons plus some 5,000 nineteenth-century Runaways (Coster 1866:6), for a grand total of perhaps 66,000 survivors and descendants of the 202,000 people originally imported from Africa.

Origins ("proveniences") are unavoidably and regrettably obscured. For the first half-century of Suriname slavery (1650–1700), some 52 percent of the imported slaves were Loangos or Kongos. During the next quarter century that fell to 16 percent, went down to 8 percent between 1726 and 1735, only to rise again to 32 percent between 1736 and 1795 (Price & Price 1999:278). Conditions being what they were, not all these people contributed equally to the gene pool. Moreover, the rest of the slaves came from the Slave Coast, the Gold Coast, and virtually every tribe and nation in West Africa that lost members to the Arab and African slaving nations. So the ultimate origins of the six tribes can only be known in the general sense of "West and Central Africa," and the individual provenience of these Afro-Americans remains no more traceable than for African-Americans in the United States. Today many of Suriname's Maroons live in the coastal cities and in foreign countries (there are some 10,000 in the Netherlands), and many more in French Guiana, Suriname's eastern neighbor. But their homelands still lie deep in the jungle interior of Suriname.

THE *REALPOLITIK* OF SLAVE ESCAPES

Whenever men are captured and cruelly forced to work in foreign climes, some will run away, risking death rather than submitting. The magnitude of that risk depends on geographical as well as societal cir-

cumstances. In the New World, native Amerindians were usually the first people to be enslaved by the Europeans. But Indians made poor plantation workers, not least because they were impossible to trace once they "voted with their feet." Africans, on the other hand, had typically experienced slavery in the societies of their birth, were physically and culturally distinct from whites and Indians, and could not flee to nearby homelands. Therefore planters in the Americas bought African slaves, and wherever it suited them they made treaties with local Indian tribes to return black Runaways to their masters—for a fee.

Wherever Indians prevented their running away from intolerable conditions, Africans would sooner or later rise up to kill their exploiters and sack the plantations. In British Guiana, Suriname's western sister colony, escapes were rare but slave revolts were common, and their suppression was always expensive and bloody. Although such uprisings always failed (in the sense that all were eventually quelled), they terrified the planters and forced them to begin humanizing the conditions of slavery.

In Suriname, however, most Indians lived along the Coast or in the lower part of the river systems; the interior of the country had become deserted during centuries of warfare between Carib- and Arawak-speakers. Some Indian tribes not only welcomed Runaways, but are reported to have actively abducted or liberated black slaves, some of whom (as veterans of African combat) soon helped the Indians fight in the Indian War (1678–1686), which briefly allied Caribs and Arawaks in a doomed attempt to drive the whites out of their country (Dragtenstein 2002:36–57). Suriname never experienced the bitter and desperate uprisings that characterize the history of Guyana, because in Suriname the bush—that is, escape with all its hardships and risks—functioned as a safety valve for slavery's excesses. Consequently Guyana never evolved black tribes, and Suriname's slavery remained intolerable far longer than in its sister colony.

"Intolerable," usually a subjective assessment, can be based on rational measurement. Elsewhere I concluded that the worst forms of slavery would exist

in permanent enslavement of freeborn individuals under conditions where the rights and obligations of master and slave are not codified and the slave cannot help effect his own release; where the slave is only incidentally human and is counted into the "overhead" as expendable equipment by a corporate ownership which directs his labors through hired intermediaries; where the slave is taken from a society which knew no slavery and thrust into one where slavery is new, with no attempt to socialize him beyond the point where he acknowledges superior power, while his very survival implies to him a threat to his manhood or to his soul. (van der Elst 1970:44)

By these standards, slavery in Suriname was among the worst that Northern Europeans have ever instituted anywhere. ✓

Unable to melt invisibly into local populations, escaped Africans in the Americas often attempted to found independent societies. There is a considerable literature about these instant communities in the Caribbean, as Price (1996) has documented. Most apparently failed early because of internal conflict, starvation, and disease, or were extinguished in military actions by the dominant society. Suriname is no exception to the rule. Communities of rebel slaves are mentioned in Suriname's archives as early as 1679, in reports on the Indian War (Dragtenstein 2002:42). Sometimes they were aided by the local Indians, at other times destroyed by them. Price (1993:41) starts his account of the Saamaka clan, whose history he knew best, in 1685. The ancestors of the present Ndyuka first appear in the colonial documentation a generation later, in 1706 (Dragtenstein 2002:95).

The question remains why slave uprisings (with their opportunities for satisfying revenge) did not become the typical precursor to escape in Suriname. After all, the odds were in the slaves' favor: "The number of white residents never amounted to more than 7% of the number of slaves at any one time during the 17th century or in subsequent centuries; in 1738 the ratio between whites and slaves was 1:25, while in 1830, almost a century later, it was 1:20" (van Lier 1971:53).

One possible answer is that most Africans were raised in societies with institutionalized forms of slavery but not of insurrection, making escape more readily conceivable than violent insurgency. Africans typically escaped into the rain forest (usually in small groups, sometimes by the hundreds), but they also challenged the authority of the planters in other ways: through sabotage, by malingering, or sometimes by very plainly warning a plantation director that if their free Sundays (in some cases both Saturdays and Sundays) were taken away, they would rise in rebellion. The horrible fate that awaited recaptured Runaways was undoubtedly another factor because, especially in the early days, being returned for the planters' punishment was always a very real possibility: in 1773, the colony had a military force of 2,300 soldiers trained for just this purpose. Moreover, most of the people forced into slavery had no experience surviving "living rough" in tropical rainforests. Nevertheless, as long as slavery was practiced (in Suriname, abolition arrived in the same year as in the United States), some slaves continued to run away. And although most sickened and starved, were killed by military patrols or executed in horrendous fashions "to set an example for the rest," others established communities in the interior.

THE TRIBALIZATION OF THE MAROONS

Today it is popular to assume that when faced with slavery, anyone worthy of his humanity would run to freedom, whatever that is

and whatever the cost. But the fact is that even in Suriname, most slaves stayed on their plantation. Some feared the jungle, some feared being caught, some stayed behind to assist the Runaways secretly, some had other reasons. Then too, social conditions were not as black-and-white as the foregoing may have implied: manumission was a realistic possibility for black soldiers and for some others, and there have always been free blacks in Suriname—even free black slave owners, just as in the United States. By 1791, there were 1,760 free mulattoes and Negroes in the colony, three times as many as there had been in 1787. By 1812, there were 3,075; by 1830, 5,051 (van Lier 1971:97). In 1862, the year before emancipation, there were 16,479 (van Stipriaan 1993:314).

Still, far more slaves decided that waiting and hoping for manumission was not the answer; they ran away instead. Because of their need for waterpower, plantations were erected near the great rivers. Since there is no faster way to get around in the rain forest than by canoe, communities of Indians and of Runaways were also invariably located along rivers and major creeks. The coastal terrain was firmly controlled by the whites, so escapees always fled upriver.

Their need for food, women, weapons, tools, and other necessities forced the early Runaways to steal from (and often sack) outlying plantations, with the expectable result of military expeditions sent out to bring them back or to eradicate them. But they soon became such an economic burden to the planters that in the mid-1700s treaties were signed with three major groups—the Ndyuka in 1760, the Saamaka in 1762, and the Matawai in 1767. The treaties recognized the former slaves' independence, granted them vast territories in the interior, and guaranteed them certain rights.

Ndyuka

706 The earliest reports on the Ndyuka Maroons date from the first decade of the eighteenth century (Dragtenstein 2002:95). Although at the beginning of the twentieth century a Ndyuka High Priest opined that his ancestors had not battled the Dutch as hard as the Saamaka and the Matawai did (de Goeje 1908:66), recent archival research convincingly demonstrates that the Ndyuka Maroons fought colonial troops almost continuously from 1715 until 1759 (Dragtenstein 2002:98–184). In 1760, the Ndyuka were the first to sign a treaty with the colony.

Matawai

The ancestors of today's 4,000 Matawai (all estimates of present population sizes are from Price 2002) ran away before 1667, during the English period, and settled on the upper Saramacca River where

many Saamaka then lived. Between about 1750 and 1770, these proto-Matawai, under the leadership of their headmen Becu and Musinga, posed a considerable threat to the plantation colony (de Beet & Sterman 1981:9). In 1767, the Dutch concluded a peace treaty with these Maroons. Even then, they refused to return Runaways to the government, and in 1778 there was fighting with government troops about the Becu group's harboring of Runaways (de Beet & Sterman 1981:10).

Saamaka

When Spain exported the Inquisition to Brazil, the Portuguese Jewish planters there escaped to Suriname, where they were allowed to found plantations along the Saramacca River and taught the Dutch much of the culture of slavery and plantation life. While the Jews were far more experienced and reasonable masters than the Protestants, their slaves, too, ran off—to become the ancestors of today's approximately 50,000 Saamaka, who, driven from their first homes, now live along the upper Suriname River and in French Guiana. (Richard and Sally Price have written exhaustively on Saamaka history and culture.) Other river systems produced other tribes that, although they share most basic culture traits, are clearly distinguishable ideologically.

Although each of the treaties committed the newly independent Bush Negro tribes to return Runaways to the colony, thereby theoretically creating as hostile an environment to would-be escapees as they would have faced in any pacified-Indian environment, the three newly coined "Bush Negro tribes" often found it more expedient to convert new Runaways into vassals or servants than to bring them back to their masters. However, in 1768 the escape route to the south was effectively closed off with a military *cordon sanitaire*. Thereafter, Runaways had a harder time reaching freedom. Life was also made more difficult for other non-treaty communities. Documentation on one of those, the people of Kormantine Kodjo, dates back to 1758. These people apparently fled into the jungle almost as soon as they arrived in Suriname (Hoogbergen 1990:47–51).

Aluku

In 1768, a protracted war erupted between the colonial forces and the Maroon followers of Aluku and Boni. The latter led the guerrillas fighting the Dutch, while Aluku took care of provisions and the women and children. Around 1771 they erected a fortified village on the Cottica. In 1773 Kormantine Kodjo and his people joined them. The Aluku (as the tribalized descendants of these disparate groupings are now called) were widely dispersed for safety and led by various men, including some recent Runaways.

Today's 6,000 Aluku are heir to the most warlike history among the Maroons. In 1776, when they numbered 400–500, they began retreating slowly to the Marowijne, but were still fighting in the Cottica region in 1777 (Hoogbergen 1990:96–105). They were driven out of the area by a coalition of forces including 800 regular troops, the “Red Berets” (the Corps of Free Negroes or Black Rangers who served the colony as mercenary troops), and some 300 or 400 Indians. In 1793, at the end of the Second Boni War, Boni was killed by the Ndyuka because his son Agosu had attacked the Ndyuka village of Puketi. The Aluku then fought their way across French Guiana, actually reaching the Oyapoc river (which forms that colony's eastern boundary) where their attack on a French outpost was beaten off. Then they withdrew again to eastern Suriname, where they became unwilling vassals of the Ndyuka. In 1860, the Dutch government declared the Aluku independent of the Ndyuka and gave them the same rights as the treaty tribes. But continued friction with the Ndyuka led the Aluku in 1892 to move to French Guiana and to accept French citizenship. Most of them now live on the French side of the Lawa river; only a single Aluku village remains in Suriname (Bilby 1990, Hoogbergen 1990, Hurault 1961).

Pamaka

The 6,000 Pamaka descend from another, smaller group of Runaways who had elected to remain hidden in the jungle as *Bakabusi* (backwoods people). Eventually the Ndyuka encouraged them to settle along the Marowijne and on Langatabiki island at the mouth of the Paramacca Creek for which they are named. For 16 years after slavery had ended, the Pamaka were kept subservient to the Ndyuka—by force when necessary. (Maroons apparently saw no irony in subjugating others who had fled the same slavery as their ancestors had.) Then, in 1879, the Pamaka disclosed their existence to the colonial authorities who, after determining that such a group actually existed, left it to the missions to take care of “civilizing” them. Only much later would their civil organization (Paramount Chief, village Captain, etc.) be recognized by the Dutch as legitimate.

Kwinti

The 600 Coppename Kwinti claim to include both the oldest and the most recently formed Runaway clans (van der Elst 1975 a, b, c). One clan traces its origin to escapees who fled eastward from the doomed Great Slave Revolt in Berbice in 1763; a second (the Kofimaka) to a group that fled westward from the Ndyuka in 1793, while the third clan is acknowledged by the others to descend from the earliest known group of runaways in the time of Lord Willoughby (1650s),

who fled up the Coppename. Around the first decade of the nineteenth century, the three clans united as the Kwinti in the forests between the Coppename and Saramacca rivers, and around 1850 met and joined the Matawai. They still complain about how they were treated by the latter. Around 1890, during continuous conflict with Matawai Paramount Chief Noah Adrai, their Captain Alamu led most of the Kwinti out of Matawai territory to settle on the Coppename. They greatly resent that they are the only Maroon tribe never to have its chief recognized as a Gaanman, a Paramount Chief. Alamu and his successors have been kept at Head-Captain status, technically implying the Kwinti's subservience to the Matawai Gaanman.

These six free black societies—Ndyuka, Saamaka, Matawai, Aluku, Pamaka, and Kwinti—have demonstrably different cultures, but share the somewhat unusual trait of reckoning their kinship through female links only. Matrilineality is relatively uncommon in West Africa, although the Ashanti, a major slaving power on the Gold Coast, famously practiced it. But the specific type of matrilineality in Suriname's Maroons is not found anywhere else: it combines Hawaii-style cousin terminology with clans and lineages. True Hawaiian kinship, one of the commonest forms of kinship organization worldwide, is bilateral, and has neither clans nor lineages. So even in the way they reckon family—one of the most change-resisting elements in any society—the Suriname Maroons demonstrate their genius for making Frankensteinian combinations of culture traits viable. The importance of matrilineality to their survival has never, I believe, been investigated.

Another characteristic of the Maroons is that their belief systems incorporate numerous pantheons of African derivation. But what most distinguishes each tribe from the others is its particular attitude toward wisi and kunu (avenging spirits). For the Ndyuka, wisi is the most important consideration in social existence; for the Kwinti and the Saamaka it is a distant second to the dangers in kunu. The Kwinti even deny that wisi is possible among them, although they are very much convinced that witches are real among the other tribes.

MAROONS AND MISSIONARIES

Throughout this culture area, Christianity almost never replaces the native polytheism but is merely added to it as yet another pantheon. The Ndyuka and the Aluku have not been greatly influenced by the missions. About half the Saamaka have been baptized.

The Matawai come closest to being a Christian society. Their transformation began with Johannes King (1830–1899), the "Bushland Prophet," whose mother was Matawai and whose father was Ndyuka. In dreams and visions, King believed himself to have been called by

the Christian God to save his people, and in 1860 he asked the Moravian (Herrnhutter) missionaries in Paramaribo to baptize him. In 1861 he was appointed teacher, and he returned to the interior to spread the Gospel among the pagans. He is still recognized as the most successful missionary ever in the interior; after 1860 his teachings dominated Matawai religious thought. Between 1872 and 1895 King wrote his dreams and his visions of Hell in his *Skrekibuku* (Book of Horrors). His diaries document changes in the religious beliefs of the Maroons and date the spread of the Ndyuka's Gaantata (Gaan Tata) cult beyond their tribal boundaries to no later than 1894 (King 1973:49).

King's success was due in large part to his not being a cultural outsider to the people he attempted to convert. He operated as Maroon prophets traditionally have, and much of his vision varied greatly from that of the European Herrnhutters. Over time, the church he founded among the Matawai became dominated by the Moravian mission, and his personal dreams and revelations were suppressed. In 1893, Johannes King wrote another book, one decrying the difficulties in being a man of God. When he died in 1899, the baptized Matawai were being served in their religion by a native preacher and three evangelists. But although today's Matawai, as Christians, reject many Afro-American explanations for misfortune, illness, and death, they remain ideologically Maroon: they focus *their* fears on *siiba*, the possibility that someone is calling upon God Almighty to harm them in some way. This is clearly a variant of the fear of wisi, where evil spirits are used for evil purposes by evil people. But according to their ethnographers, this is not syncretism: "Their traditional Afro-American religion has been remarkably able, in spite of every opposition from the mission, to maintain itself. The result is that each religion functions in comparative independence of the other. Still, there is tension. Conflicts do occur between them" (de Beet & Sterman 1981:529; translation mine).

The Coppename Kwinti are the smallest (and most endangered) of the Maroon tribes. In the 1970s, most Kwinti lived in Bitagron, the first village in the interior to be connected by a road to Paramaribo, the capital city 150 km away. They were nominally Christian because they wanted their children to be able to attend the Moravian Mission's school in Kaaimanston, a half-hour upriver by outboard-powered canoe. Kaaimanston was then almost totally deserted because the teacher, a Saamaka convert, had taken it upon himself to destroy the village's ancestor shrines. The Bitagron Kwinti also attended every Mass that the itinerant Dutch priest would celebrate, every six weeks or so. But most of their religious energy was spent on the traditional Maroon rites of passage, on kunu obligations, and on spirit possessions—concepts that will be made clear in the following chapters.

Today, the Maroons are under extreme pressure from the outside world. Suriname's impoverished government wants to open the rain forest to mercantile exploitation and has sold immense tracts of the interior to foreign gold and lumber interests without adequately compensating or protecting the native populations of Indians and Maroons. Conflicts escalate, even though the war for control over the interior has ended. The Maroon cultures continue to adapt and evolve, each tribe in its own fashion. Those who have settled in French Guiana already wield more economic power than that territory's own Creole population: they have become the labor force for France's space program at Kourou, and constitute a growing electorate, which the French use to counter the independence movement among the Creoles there.

Note

- ¹ The language of the Ndyuka (Ndyukatongo) does not use plural forms; hence words such as wisiman can mean one witch or several witches.

When referring to themselves, Ndyuka Maroons prefer the term *Ndyuka* or *Ndyuka Nengon* (*Ndyuka Negroes*), but they also use the name *Okanié* (written *Aukaners* by the Dutch). Their language is known as *Ndyukatongo*; it is akin to *Granonkongo*, the Creole of coastal Suriname. As Hutter & Butler (1994) conclude in the introduction to their book on this language, "Ndyuka reflects the influence of a variety of Amerindian, European and African languages." In this study we have adopted most of the orthography used by André Pikevie (1989). In the older literature, Ndyuka Maroons are known as "Djuka" or "Dyuka," and "Aukaners" or "Aukaners." In this book they will be called Ndyuka throughout. When the Ndyuka refer to their people as a group they often say *Den Twalupé* (The Twelve [Clans]).

TAPANAHONI SOCIETY

After a peace treaty with the Dutch was concluded in 1704, the Ndyuka began to leave their villages along the Ndyuka Creek, to settle on islands in or on the banks of the Tapanahoni River in colonial Suriname (see fig. 1). This population shift was completed around 1750. Today, with more than 20,000 inhabitants, the Tapanahoni region (including adjacent parts of the Lawa and Marowijne rivers) is still the main area of settlement. But French Guiana is rapidly becoming another important place of settlement for the Ndyuka, especially the areas around St. Laurent and Mana. Price (2002:82)

The World of the Ndyuka

When referring to themselves, Ndyuka Maroons prefer the terms Ndyuka or Ndyuka Nengee (Ndyuka Negroes), but they also use the name Okanisi (written Aucaners by the Dutch). Their language is known as Ndyukatongo; it is akin to Sranantongo, the Creole of coastal Suriname. As Huttar & Huttar (1994) conclude in the Introduction to their book on this language, “Ndyuka reflects the influence of a variety of Amerindian, European and African languages.” In this study we have adopted most of the orthography used by André Pakosie (2003). In the older literature, Ndyuka Maroons are known as “Djuka” or “Djoeka,” and “Aukaners” or “Aucaners.” In this book they will be called Ndyuka throughout. When the Ndyuka refer to their people as a group they often say *Den Tualufu* (The Twelve [Clans]).

TAPANAHONI SOCIETY

After a peace treaty with the Dutch was concluded in 1760, the Ndyuka began to leave their villages along the Ndyuka Creek, to settle on islands in or on the banks of the Tapanahoni River in southeastern Suriname (see fig. 1). This population shift was completed around 1780. Today, with more than 20,000 inhabitants, the Tapanahoni region (including adjacent parts of the Lawa and Marowijne rivers) is still the main area of settlement. But French Guiana is rapidly turning into another important place of settlement for the Ndyuka, especially the areas around St. Laurent and Mana. Price (2002:82)

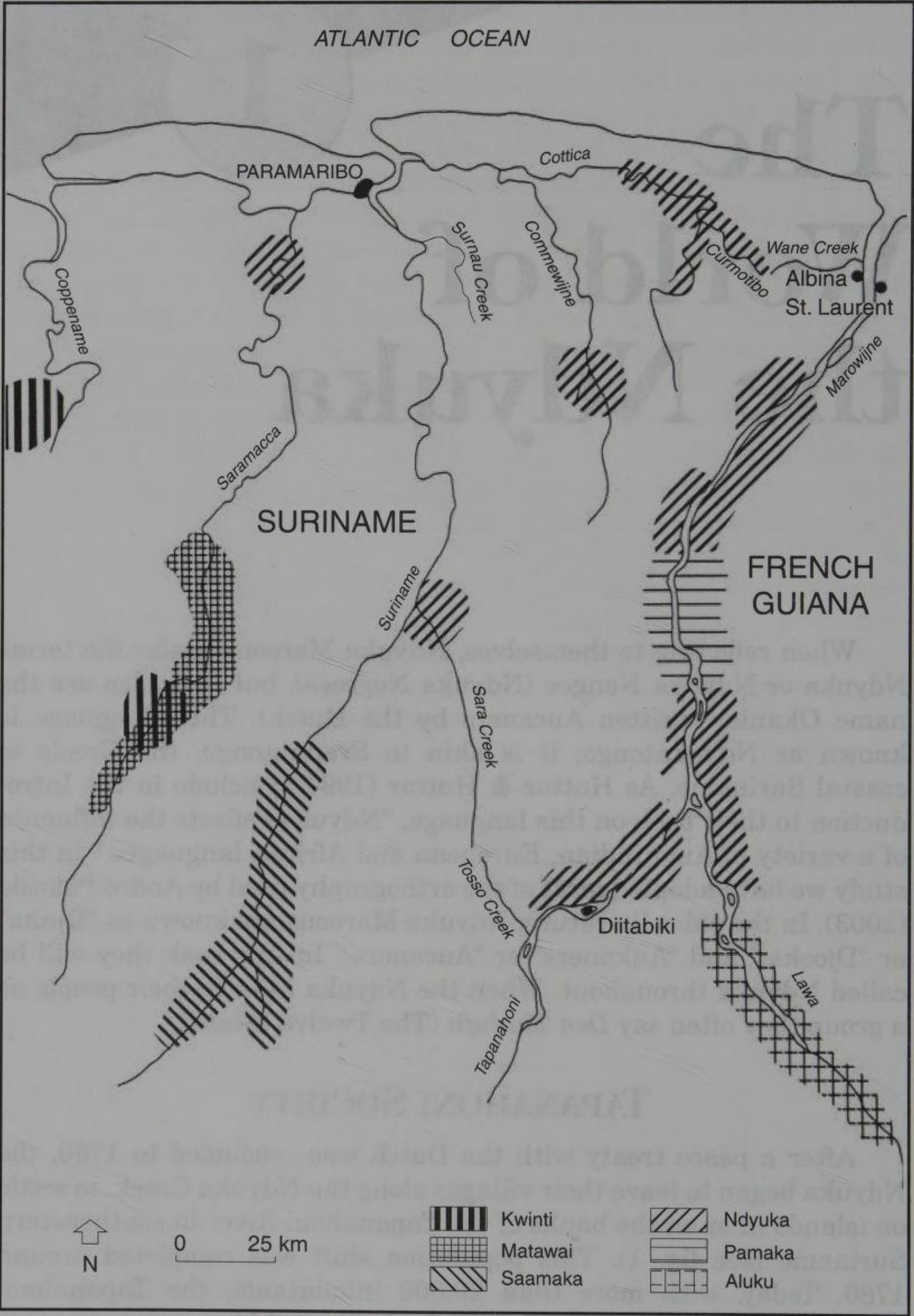


Figure 1 Maroon groups in Suriname, 1900.

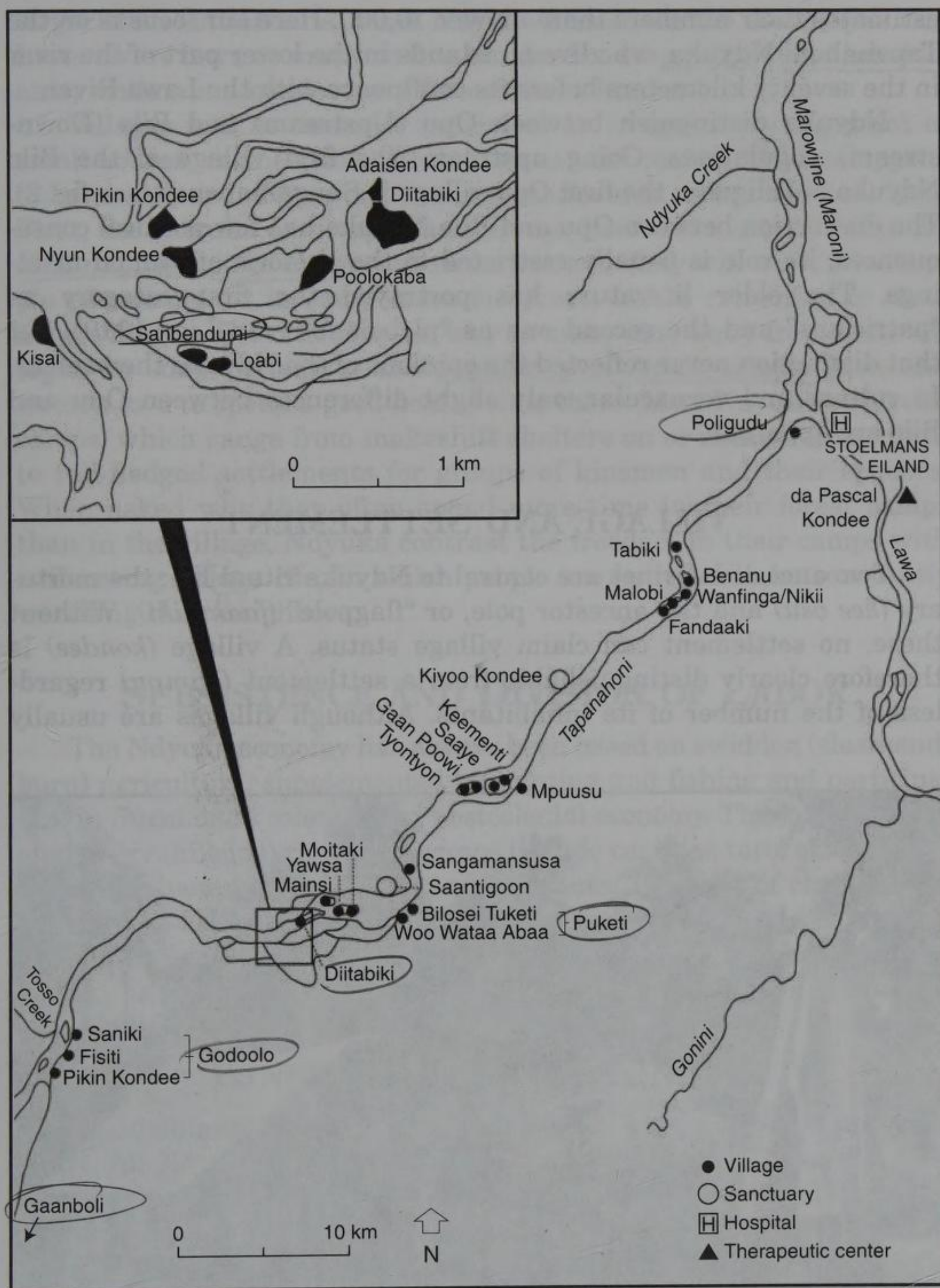


Figure 2 Ndyuka villages and sanctuaries of the Tapanahoni River, 1960–2000.

estimates their numbers there at over 10,000. Here our focus is on the Tapanahoni Ndyuka, who live on islands in the lower part of the river in the seventy kilometers before its confluence with the Lawa River.

Ndyuka distinguish between Opu (Upstream) and Bilo (Downstream) populations. Going upstream, the first village of the Bilo Ndyuka is Poligudu; the first Opu village is Sangamansusa (see fig. 2). The distinction between Opu and Bilo Ndyuka has few political consequences; its role is usually restricted to the rhetoric of council meetings. The older literature has portrayed the first category as “patricians” and the second one as “plebeians” (van Lier 1919), but that distinction never reflected the opinions of the Ndyuka themselves. In culture and vernacular, only slight differences between Opu and Bilo are apparent.

VILLAGE AND SETTLEMENT

✓ Two ancestor shrines are central to Ndyuka ritual life: the mortuary (*kee osu*) and the ancestor pole, or “flagpole” (*faakatiki*). Without these, no settlement can claim village status. A village (*kondee*) is therefore clearly distinguishable from a settlement (*kampu*) regardless of the number of its inhabitants. Although villages are usually



Figure 3 Ancestor pole and mortuary (*faakatiki* and *kee osu*)—two ritual constructions that give a settlement village status.

larger than settlements, some Ndyuka *kampu* on the Marowijne and Lawa rivers have as many as five hundred or even a thousand inhabitants, while some *kondee* have fewer than a hundred.

Villages and settlements consist of an irregular arrangement of small houses, shrines, domesticated trees, and bushes. Villages appear to be abandoned. There are two reasons for this rather desolate look. First, the Ndyuka economy is and always has been a money economy. Men migrate to the Coast to earn an income. They will work for a couple of months, or in some cases for years, before returning to their natal villages. The other reason why so many stay away from their villages for long periods is the popularity of forest camps. Men and women love to spend a good deal of time there. Most Ndyuka own such camps, which range from makeshift shelters on or near their gardens to full-fledged settlements for groups of kinsmen and their spouses. When asked why they often spend more time in their forest camps than in the village, Ndyuka contrast the freedom in their camps with suffocating village life, in which people are believed to be constantly watching their neighbors. ✓

SUBSISTENCE AND DIVISION OF LABOR

The Ndyuka economy has always been based on *swidden* (slash-and-burn) agriculture, supplemented by hunting and fishing and participation in Suriname's colonial and postcolonial economy. The major garden crop is dry (hillside) rice. Other crops include cassava, taro, okra, maize, plantains, bananas, sugar-cane, and peanuts. The task of clearing and burning the fields is done by men, but planting, weeding, and harvesting are mainly women's work. Hunting with shotguns is an exclusively male activity as was, until the 1980s, wage labor outside of the tribal area.

KINSHIP AND QUASI KINSHIP

The dominant principle of Ndyuka social organization is matrilineality. All Ndyuka know to which of the 14 matrilineal clans (*lo*) they belong. A synonym for the Ndyuka nation is Den Tualufu, "The Twelve," meaning "The Twelve Clans." But Ndyuka people will immediately add *Gaanman meke tinadii* (Gaanman's [Paramount Chief's] 13 clan makes for the thirteenth). What has no part in this traditional formula is the slow growth towards legitimacy of a fourteenth clan, the *Lebimusu*, the "Red Berets," the descendants of a group of Black 14 Rangers, colonial soldiers who, after a mutiny in 1807, settled at the confluence of Tapanahoni and Lawa, where they founded the village of Poligudu. For most of the nineteenth century they were considered second-class citizens; nowadays they are considered as just another Ndyuka clan. To refer to their low origins is considered bad taste.

With few exceptions, Ndyuka villages are “owned” by a single clan. Clans are divided into matrilineages (*bee*). Each lineage can be subdivided into matrisegments—*wan mama pikin* (one mother’s children) or *mama osu pikin* (maternal home’s descendants). Because all members of a matrilineage share inescapable religious obligations, along with some corporate rights in land and some political offices, bee membership is the irreducible point from which every Ndyuka’s place in social space is determined. Still, as in most matrilineal societies, other principles structure kinship relations. The *famii*, the bilateral consanguineous kin group, plays an increasingly important role in Ndyuka ritual and economic life. A third social grouping comes into existence when a prestigious Captain or a priest of a religious cult succeeds in encouraging consanguineal and affinal kin to take up residence in his village quarter. Such a *foloku* (following) gradually may assume a corporate identity and will then be known as “The People of So-and-So.” Generations after the founder has died, some of these followings are still recognized as corporate groups.

SOCIOPOLITICAL ORGANIZATION

The Ndyuka, like the other Maroon groups, maintain considerable autonomy within the Republic of Suriname. Ndyuka society is zealously egalitarian, and no social or occupational classes are distinguished. Elders are accorded special respect. Burial societies and spirit medium cults provide cross-cutting ties between largely autonomous matrilineages and followings. Two associations are responsible for mortuary rites: *oloman* (gravediggers) and *kisiman* (coffin makers). All adult males are members of one of these sodalities. Some women are allowed to join the gravediggers association but may play only narrowly circumscribed roles. The *basi fu olo* (headmen of the gravediggers) occupy strategic positions in the important corpse divination rituals.

The Ndyuka have a hierarchy of political functionaries. These are appointed at tribal council meetings and routinely confirmed by Suriname’s national administration. That confirmation denotes official recognition and the payment of a salary. The hierarchy is headed by a *Gaanman* (Paramount Chief). Villages usually have two or three *Kabiten*¹ (Captains or village headmen); two *basiya* assist each headman. The office of Captain is the property of a specific matrilineage.

Regularly, a host of issues is submitted for arbitration in council meetings (*kuutu*) that vary in size from a few elders of the small family group to congregations of all the senior men of village or tribe, collectively referred to as *lanti* (the citizenry). Most important decisions affecting village life are made by this collective of male elders, usually after consultation with senior women. Many elders see these palavers as opportunities to display their oratorical gifts, so a *kuutu* may last

for many hours before any decisions are reached. Conflicts and disagreements deemed relevant only to a small group of kinfolk tend to be discussed by a few men and women in the seclusion of a house, usually early in the morning.

HISTORICAL STAGES

The beginning of all Maroon history lies in the African past, but it is a distant and remote past. Maroon historiography offers little about this, and relatively few myths or other accounts refer to events that took place on the other side of the Atlantic. The first developed stage of Maroon historiography deals with the Maroons' experiences as slaves on the plantations in Suriname's coastal plain. Maroons are never ambivalent in their condemnation of slavery. Whatever doubts Maroons might voice about some of their ancestors and former leaders, Ndyuka historians, like all other Maroon historians, keep alive the memory of their predicament as slaves. They tell their children how their ancestors were dragged off in chains to the slavers' ships, about the agony of the transatlantic crossing in the holds of ships, and about the cruelty of the planters.

Ndyuka distinguish quite clearly three stages and two "generations." The stages are: *katibo ten*, the time of their suffering as slaves; *loweten* (runaway time), the years of the great escape into the forest and the ordeals awaiting them in that hostile environment; and finally *a fii*, the time after the peace treaties. *Katibo* and *loweten* are stages fixed in maroon thought, anchored in a number of standard historical episodes. The period after the treaty, *a fii*, is seen as changeable in quality; for a few decades their new freedom seemed to them extremely precarious. But then they began to grow confident about the new situation; *a fii dipi* (peace settled), is what people say of the time when they felt assured that they were relatively safe. "Relatively," because Maroons hold that only fools indulge in complete trust in the *Bakaa* (all Outsiders who are neither Maroons nor Amerindians). The enjoyment of freedom, however, was great. It is still celebrated today. Ndyuka constantly remind one another that they live in a free state. When they visit each other, before their boats come to a stop on the sandy beaches of their island fortresses, they exchange greetings. A host welcomes his visitor with the old sentry challenge: "*Wadaa, wadaa . . . ooo!*" (This comes from the German *Werda!* meaning "Who is there?"). The visitor responds: "*Fiiman*" (free person).

The generations distinguished by Maroons are: *fositen sama* (first-time people), the founders of the Ndyuka nation, and the *baka kio* (later-day people), the founders' descendants. All that is valuable, Ndyuka assert, has been created by these "first-time people"; their descendants came to enjoy what had been won at great cost.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS: THE PANTHEONS

The Ndyuka insist that human knowledge is severely limited, and other paths to the unknown are therefore highly valued. Much of what is not known to humans is in the domain of the gods. Ndyuka recognize numerous *gadu* (gods) who are believed to be powerful and immortal beings, though few are considered omniscient or omnipresent. The supreme Ndyuka pantheon has a three-tiered structure. At the top of the supernatural hierarchy is *Masaa Gadu* (the Lord God), or *Masaa Gadu na Tapu* (the Lord God Above), or in sacred *Kumanti* language, *Anana Keduaman Keduampon*, meaning "God the Creator of Heaven and Earth" (Wooding 1981:67). *Masaa Gadu* is the source of all creation. Immediately below *Masaa Gadu* in spiritual power are "his assistants," the great deities: First, *Gaan Tata* (Great Father), also known as *Gaan Gadu* or *Bigi Gadu* (Great Deity) or as *Gwangwella*, his esoteric name. Of equal rank are *Ogii* (Danger) and *Agedeonsu* or *Ndyuka Gadu* (Deity of the Ndyuka), a God offering shelter and protection to the Ndyuka people, as well as good harvests and plenty of fish and game. These divine beings intervene directly in human affairs, take sides in conflicts, and punish humans for their sins. Unlike *Masaa Gadu*, who protects all humankind equally, the great deities are associated with the Ndyuka. A quite different place is occupied by *Sweli Gadu* (the God of the Oath), a deity sent directly by *Masaa Gadu*.

It is said that *Gaan Tata* was so indignant about the injustice done to the Ndyuka that he led them out of slavery, fighting alongside his people, much like Yahweh among the Jews. Even today, *Gaan Tata* is seen primarily as a staunch defender of the Ndyuka people against their most dangerous enemies, who almost always are fellow Maroons: *wisiman*. The deity is also pictured as a defender of traditional Ndyuka culture, upholding menstrual taboos and persecuting thieves, adulterers, and homosexuals.

Ogii is the king of the forest spirits. A critical agency antedating the coming of the African gods to South America, he is ambivalent toward them and their human followers. Unless appeased, he can turn enormously destructive. *Agedeonsu*, on the other hand, is considered to be a protective, comforting deity. In their prayers to him, the Ndyuka say: "When we are hungry, we know where to run to. You will always be there to take care of us, to offer us solace."

At times it seems that *Masaa Gadu* is not fully satisfied with how his three sacred assistants intervene with humans. Therefore, whenever the human community is in a state of disorder for any length of time, the Supreme Being may convene a *gadu kuutu*, a special council to be held in *gadu kondee* (the country of the gods). Both this very special palaver and the place where it unfolds are ill-defined in Ndyuka theological thought. But the *yeye*, *Masaa Gadu*'s divine envoy, is

clearly recognized as a restorer spirit, that is as a divine plenipotentiary charged with the limited but crucial task of restoring order in a corrupt world.

Most gods of the third tier, the minor deities, are potentially invading spirits. Until about 1970 the Ndyuka recognized four main pantheons: the *Yooka* (ancestors), *Papagadu* or *Vodu* (reptile spirits), *Ampuku* (forest spirits) and *Kumanti* (warrior spirits residing in celestial phenomena such as thunder and lightning, carrion birds, and other animals of prey). These minor deities constitute a spiritual realm full of variety and color. They are often depicted as human beings endowed with specific supernatural powers. They control particular domains and have distinctive interests, predilections, and frailties. Also like human beings, many deities mate, procreate, and produce hybrid types. They exhibit great differences in supernatural power, and their relations with humanity vary from benevolent to hostile.

Except for the *Kumanti* spirits, all may turn into *kunu* (avenging spirits) when offended or to redress human sins or negligence. In theory, the *kunu* is strictly tied to the matrilineage. In practice, a *kunu*'s range of action is often more limited. For example, one segment of a matrilineage may accept a fury as being of supreme importance to the well-being of all, while another matrisegment of the same lineage hotly contests such a claim. Nonetheless, all lineages have one or more *kunu*. Some lineages share a *kunu*. This may have come about, for example, when men from two or more lineages joined forces to lynch a suspect by burning him at the stake as a witch, only to discover later—sometimes generations later—he had been wrongly accused. Two or more lineages will then have to share in the veneration of a *kunu*.

Among the invading spirits, *bakuu* (demon spirits), which are classified as subsidiary to the forest spirits, were at one time not tolerated as possessing spirits. Demon possession has become more widespread during the last three decades. Their provenance can be traced to Paramaribo or the coastal towns of French Guiana. In the first stages of *bakuu* possession, the human carriers can expect help from the demon, but gradually the *bakuu* will corrupt its human vessel and become a threat to the lives of the medium's relatives.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS: OBIYA AND YEYE

Obiya and *yeye* are key theological notions. According to the Ndyuka, enormous powers dwell in the universe. Most of these are untapped by humans and are, in fact, even unknown to them. A medicine, or *obiya*, is any part of such forces that has become available to humans. For humans, all *obiya* have potentially beneficial aspects, although parts of them can be harmful under certain conditions. An *obiya* has assumed a definite shape so that it can be distinguished

from other such supernatural forces. Human effort and dedication are needed to realize all or part of its potential. As a result there is something finite about obiya. The minor deities, for example, that might take possession of humans—also called obiya—are specific and distinct and inevitably subject to limitations. Although charged with superhuman potential, they are never without a human touch or, for that matter, human frailty. Obiya are the end product of a long process of crystallization, steered to some extent by man. During this process, they have acquired a great deal of autonomy from the supernatural agency from which they are derived, or which had made them available as “raw materials.”

oath-taking

People refer to Sweli Gadu as an obiya and as a yeye. When they refer to the obiya, they mean the various material objects connected with the Sweli Gadu cult that human beings have become accustomed to. But on other occasions, when referring to the source of these forces, they will call Sweli Gadu a yeye. In common parlance, a yeye either is a synonym for the soul, or it denotes an aspect of the human soul or a possessing spirit that is pure, undiluted, and flowing directly from the highest supernatural source of the universe. This last meaning may clarify our argument here. The yeye resembles the Socratic demon, an intuitive personal conscience, or an aspect of an invading spirit that performs a similar psychic function.

Sweli Gadu then is a yeye, but not one of the rank and file. It is an emanation of the Supreme Deity, the Creator God, Masaa Gadu na Tapu. Seen in historical perspective, it is the first of a small group of “restorer spirits” that, as a direct manifestation of the most Divine Authority, are sent to the world when conditions have deteriorated too much. A yeye is never taken to be an independent supernatural force. It cannot be harnessed, tamed, or put to work for human ends. It is above manipulation and scheming. Untainted by human mediation or tampering, it is like the biblical Melchizedek, a spirit without parentage. This guarantees purity and an absolute generalized authority, but also makes for a certain elusiveness. When discussing the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Ndyuka priestesses,² who are better known today than their male colleagues, people would say “*Sweli losi ala den obiya gi den*” (Sweli made all the obiya available to them). Sweli, although certainly no pawn in the hands of humans, gave the priestesses the tools to work with. The moment the priestesses started working these tools, these objects or incantations turned into obiya.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS: KUNU

All Maroon societies in Suriname have a matrilineal kinship structure, and Ndyuka society is no exception. Matrilineal groups—kinsmen who trace their descent through the female line—form the

core of Ndyuka communities. They vary in size from a small number of persons who recognize a common great-grandmother as their ancestor—and can indicate the exact relationship to that ancestor (the bee)—to larger groups who share an ideology of common matrilineal descent, but who make no effort to find genealogical ties (the lo). The matrilineage, the “belly” (bee), is the largest corporate kin group of this culture. Its membership usually varies between 50 and 200. Lineages share a strong communal ideology. Notions on communality are founded on both material and immaterial assets. They hold titles to land and the right to be officially represented at council meetings or at rites by a headman or Captain (kabiten) and his assistants (basiya)—functionaries who receive a salary from the government.

Even more important for the cohesion of a lineage than these material possessions and titles is the belief in a special relationship between a lineage and a particular class of supernatural beings, the furies or avenging spirits (kunu). Such deities or spirits, as the term suggests, visit humans as agencies of retaliation. Kunu is one of the most important concepts in Maroon culture. It refers to a ghost or spirit that, as a result of human crimes (which can range from murder to petty theft), mistakes, or negligence, has as its goal not merely to punish the offender but all of her or his matrilineage. For generations after the miscreant's death, the spirit continues to torment his or her matrilineal relatives. The sociological consequences of such theological notions are striking and significant. At the heart of this belief system is the notion of a collective curse. Although it is often the single individual who has provoked the spirit, the fury will prosecute all lineage members with equal ferocity and determination.

All Ndyuka matrilineages are haunted by one or more such furies. Usually, with proper rituals and feasts of atonement, the spirit can be pacified, but neglecting a kunu is asking for trouble. It then becomes hell-bent on killing every member of the matrilineage. Gifts and expensive feasts to honor the kunu are usually enough to keep the fury at bay, but it is always a truce, there can never be a permanent peace between the avenging spirit and the matrilineage concerned. Any trouble, any brawl between members of that lineage will reactivate the kunu. Some matrilineages have kunu that date from the eighteenth century. All Maroons give the kunu concept a central place in their cultural repertoire, but nowhere is it so important as to the Saamaka and the Kwinti,³ two Maroon tribes living to the west of the Ndyuka.

The belief in avenging spirits creates a bond between groups since the matrilineages, “bellies,” of both offender and of victim must honor the fury. To offer an example, during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a number of Ndyuka, male and female, were burnt at the stake after being convicted at the tribal poison ordeal as witches (see chapter 5). Later divination often demonstrated that these people

had been executed without due reason. The spirits of these victims were then believed to haunt the lineages of their executioners. The furies returned to take possession of a member of the victim's group and use this person as a medium to announce their intention of punishing the wrongdoers and their kin. Their descendants did not escape that fate either: sickness, death, and disaster awaited them.

The belly bears collective responsibility for appeasing the spirit. The belly must collect money and offerings and take responsibility for the service in honor of the spirit and for all actions by its members that offend the fury. Gossip, backbiting, and dissension are believed to activate the avenging spirit. In social terms it means that in a dispute influential individuals within the community, such as shamans and Captains, can attribute sickness and disaster to a fury's wrath. Belief in avenging spirits can thus play an important role in the process of social control. Sharing the same fate is a feeling strongly promoted by such religious notions.

Despite the central place in Ndyuka culture occupied by the belief in avenging spirits, its significance in social life is often contested in specific cases. Collective representations do not exist in thin air; the belief in furies is molded by social forces as are other parts of a cosmology. Individuals may say they have been invaded by an avenging spirit, but their claims are not always recognized by their own family, let alone by more remote kin. A medium may step forward to relate divine experiences in public while the matrilineal kin, the other members of the belly, are not prepared to take it seriously. Though in theory the avenging spirit's "range of action" covers the entire matrilineal group, in fact it is highly variable, depending on the type of fury, the status of the medium within his group, and the impression that the performance of the spirit makes (Thoden van Velzen 1966b). Hence, collective representations such as that of avenging spirits do not always reinforce group unity.

RELIGIOUS PRACTITIONERS

There is no formal cult for Masaa Gadu, but worship of the great deities (Gaan Tata, Ogii, and Agedeonsu) has an organized framework. Separate shrines are dedicated to these powers, and specialized religious intermediaries, priests, officiate there. The discussion of two of these cults—Gaan Tata and Ogii—forms the core of this book. Agedeonsu's priests usually stayed out of politics, and therefore do not loom large in our interests. All the major problems facing the Ndyuka are discussed at the oracles of these deities. When a new medium seeks legitimization, his or her first trip is to one of their shrines. The importance of these Afro-American cults in the social and political life of the Ndyuka can hardly be exaggerated.

In every generation a prophet emerges to articulate the unsatisfactory state of social routines, governance, and public morals in Ndyuka society—sometimes with staggering impact on religious institutions and the conduct of daily life. These men and their messages were and are the driving force behind Ndyuka ideological evolution, and therefore an important subject of our work. Others, like the High Priest Saka (see chapter 5), are better called religious entrepreneurs. He never delivered prophecies, nor did he regularly fall into trance as most shamans are wont to do.

THE NDYUKA AND CHRISTIANITY

Soon after the Saamaka concluded their peace treaty with the whites in 1762, missionaries of the Congregation of Moravian Brethren started preaching the gospel among them (Price 1990). Although it would take many more years before Christianity could make inroads there, serious theological discussions between Saamaka and missionaries started quite soon after the latter's arrival in 1765 (Staehelin, 1914–1925:26). The Ndyuka would not receive such attention from Mission Christianity until the end of the nineteenth century. In 1896, J. G. Spalburg, a Moravian, settled in the Gaanman's village of Diitabiki to work as teacher and missionary. Four years later he left the Tapanahoni without having made a single convert (Spalburg 1979). Opposition from Gaan Tata's priests was one important reason why his work, and that of the Protestant and Catholic missionaries who came after him, proved to be so difficult. During the last few decades, however, a few hundred Ndyuka have responded to nonconformist or Pentecostal initiatives, but at present it is not clear whether these efforts will lead to permanent changes in religious and social life.

Like the Saamaka, the Ndyuka have always been interested in Christian theology. In 1777, for example, a Ndyuka came to a mission post in Saamaka territory, listened to what the Moravians had to tell him, and stayed on for a month of theological discussions (Staehelin 1914–1925:333). Most Ndyuka respect Christianity, but their attitude toward missionaries is perhaps best illustrated by our first encounter with Gaanman Akontu in 1961. We had been asked to explain in a meeting with the Gaanman and his Captains just what the purpose of our visit was. In trying to clarify our interest in their lifeway, we told them we were not coming to bring new gods. Gaanman Akontu's answer was direct and echoed by every headman present: "That's good, because we are already well supplied."

THE NDYUKA AND OTHER MAROON RELIGIONS

The Ndyuka are importers and exporters of obiya. In the mid-1800s, they brought Papagadu obiya to the Saamaka and Matawai

(Freytag 1927:17). Near the end of the nineteenth century, the Ndyuka religious leader Saka made several trips to the Suriname River to buy obiya from the Saamaka, to bolster his political position in Ndyuka society. While there, he established a few shrines to Sweli Gadu (a deity of Ndyuka origin) in Saamaka villages. In 1892, when envoys from the Gaan Tata oracle opened branches of their cult in a couple of Saamaka villages, they proceeded to those villages where Saka's Saamaka partners operated as custodians of Sweli Gadu shrines. As this example shows, the intertribal diffusion of religious ideas was not a one-way street. Between about 1900 and 1911, a Saamaka shaman exerted an enormous influence over the Ndyuka people (see chapter 10). One reason why he could be so influential is that Ndyuka shamans greatly respect their Saamaka counterparts for their knowledge of Ampuku obiya. Similarly, though Ndyuka consider themselves quite versed in Kumanti lore, they always praise the Aluku for being past masters of Kumanti obiya.

THE LOGIC OF WITCHCRAFT

Wisi and wisiman play an important role in the social life of the Ndyuka and therefore in this book. How else could we treat this phenomenon when, during the period of our fieldwork, one out of every three Ndyuka was condemned of wisi after his or her death? In some years, as many as two out of every three corpses would receive such a verdict (van Wetering 1996:371). Wisiman are evil; they strive to hurt the people close to them as much as they possibly can. The usual explanation is envy: "You hold a good job, they want to kill you; you have a beautiful wife, they are on your trail; you are in good health, they will try to change that."

But it is not just envy or an unfair distribution of the new wealth that motivates witches. Sheer malice is enough for a witch to act—to kill or maim. Our Ndyuka friends would sometimes show their irritation when they thought we were skeptical about witches. We recall instances where they argued that we shouldn't fixate on the specific ways in which the witch operates. A direct quote from our field notes of 1962 renders this well:

Look, you Bakaa! It is clear to us that you don't believe that witches can fly through the night. All right, maybe they can't in your country. But that's not really our point. What is important to know about witches is their need to harm other people. You have told us about people in the U.S. and Europe who kill for no reason at all [they were referring to the ex-marine who shot scores of people from a water tower in Texas]. These are the people we consider to be witches. Sure we believe you when you claim that yours can't fly through the night. But they kill without reason, just like ours!

Decades later, in 2003, a Ndyuka who has lived in the Netherlands for twenty years, defined those who spread computer viruses as witches: "They are doing this to harm other people, without any justification. They are evil; they are wisiman, pure and simple."

MAROONS AS PART OF ONE CULTURE AREA

In this book, attention is so focused on Ndyuka religion that one risks losing sight of the fact that Ndyuka beliefs and practices exist in a wider ideological world, one shaped in part by shamans from the other Maroon tribes and influenced by Christianity. For all their opposition to the missionaries, some Ndyuka shamans were and are clearly influenced by Christian notions, some of which probably reached them via Saamaka religious leaders. Moreover, it would seem that although many *obiya* were originally tribe-specific, they are capable of pan-Maroon applications, for during Suriname's civil war (1986–1992), Ndyuka guerrillas never had any problem in using the *obiya* of Saamaka, Pamaka or Aluku. Nor apparently, did these tribally dedicated gods find it hard to take possession of Ndyuka—evidence that the six tribes remain part of a single culture area.

Notes

- ¹ A Kabiten is a village headman with an "extra": he can also function as a headman in other villages.
- ² Ma Cato dominated the latter part of the eighteenth century, Ma Konu Goon the first part of the nineteenth century, and Ma Dyemba the middle of the nineteenth century.
- ³ Among the Saamaka, *kunu* is the most important cause of death. Price (1975:37) writes: "Grim evidence of the efficacy of the actions of *kunu* is part of daily experience, since almost all deaths and most cases of sickness and misfortune are attributed to them." Among the Kwinti, the only tribe to believe itself free of witches, the same pattern is in evidence (Dirk H. van der Elst, personal communication).

Another Part of the Atlantic World

RESEARCH FOCUS

There are several ways to portray a modern but for outsiders exotic culture such as the Ndyuka. One could, for example, take the ethnographic approach, relating what is known about the society's modes of subsistence, kinship system, family life, and so on. Or one might use the historic approach, outlining the conditions, origins, major events, figures, and decisions that tie its past to its present. Depending on one's purpose, one could focus on economics, on geography, ideology, music, psychology, trade, warfare, or anything else; when dealing seriously with something as vast and pervasive as another culture there are no "wrong" approaches. Nevertheless, some research strategies are more likely to be fruitful than others.

For us, the most appealing angle is to present Ndyuka society as we have known it best, as a culture dominated by prophets, mediums, oracles, and antiwitchcraft movements. To make our story comprehensible, we will need to relate much information about other aspects of their culture. But because we have lived in the shadow of an important oracle, our focus will be on religion and its dominant personalities. So celebrating the vitality of this African-American civilization means documenting these individuals' lives and deeds and the political formations or regimes they were part of. Following Bax (1987:2), we define a religious regime as a formalized and institutionalized power constellation legitimized by religious ideas and propagated by



Figure 4 Shrine for the ancestors of loweten (time of escape), the war of independence (Diitabiki, 1989).

religious specialists.¹ Hence, after this introductory chapter, our attention will focus on those religious specialists who have joined forces in organizations capable of wielding power. The first part of this book will deal with Gaan Tata's religious regime; in later chapters Ogi's regime will get full attention.

AFRICA IN THE BUSH?

So this book deals with exotic subjects—oracles, mediums, and shamans—and thereby risks creating the impression of a remote backwater separated from all those developments that transformed the world during the last three centuries. Some reports by earlier students of Maroon societies have tended to popularize that impression. After a brief visit of little more than a week to the Saamaka in 1929, for exam-

ple, Melville and Francis Herskovits (1934:x) characterized Saamaka Maroon society with those words "the bush is Africa of the seventeenth century." And elsewhere, when discussing a Maroon palaver, they wrote, "Direction, authority was their legacy from Africa. Their ancestors had known the rule of dynasties, and the power of men who reigned."² Morton Kahn (1939), who visited both the Saamaka and the Ndyuka in the 1930s, was even more daring when picking a title for one of his academic publications: "Africa's Lost Tribes in South America."³ Such viewpoints could still attract considerable attention in certain academic circles a generation later. Allen Counter, a biologist, and David Evans, "an anthropologically-oriented Harvard administrator," claimed the Ndyuka as a "Lost Tribe" that had successfully preserved its African cultural heritage (Lueders 1973:6–7). They vented their excitement in *Newsweek*: "All of a sudden we realized that we had stepped back into the seventeenth century..." (1974:5). And Counter asserted: "These people... are the missing link... Now they are no longer missing."⁴ Counter and Evans went even further when they wrote, "The defiant Djukas, who won the right to choose their life-style, have existed in the deep interior virtually unchanged for three centuries..." (1974:5).⁵

The thrust of our book goes in the opposite direction. The Ndyuka, a collection of people who had been dragged away from many different tribal societies and kingdoms in eighteenth-century Africa, were forced to work together on the sugar and coffee plantations of Suriname. But even when they managed to escape, they necessarily remained in contact with the colony's thriving economy, raiding plantations and secretly bartering with the slaves left behind. However, once the peace treaties were a *fait accompli*, great numbers of them, like other Maroons, offered their services as free men in the colony's labor market. After 1885, Ndyuka involvement in the Atlantic economy deepened when their expertise as river transporters became essential to the pursuit of gold and rubber.

A second thesis of this book is that aspects of even the most exotic Ndyuka institutions are in fact the fruit of modern developments. Take, for example, the obsession with witchcraft. During the nineteenth century only a handful of men, and even fewer women, were executed as witches. But during the 1960s, one out of every three persons was posthumously condemned of witchcraft.⁶ During the 1970s, when examinations of living persons were again allowed by the tribal authorities, the percentage of witches among adults remained as high as one in three. During the closing decades of the twentieth century, the obsession with demons dominated village gossip, and oracles were just as important during the civil war (1986–1992) as they had been a century earlier. In brief, some aspects of modernization appear to have furthered the evolution of exotic institutions, not to diminish or remove them. That situation appears not to have been so different

from the earlier one in Europe, where the era of the great witch hunts began when overseas expansion created new economic relationships and new inequalities that destroyed the social fabric of the feudal Middle Ages. Norman Cohn (1975:225) points to the close of the sixteenth century as the time when the witch crazes started in earnest; Bengt Ankerloo (1990) offers the example of a witch hunt that shook Sweden at the end of the seventeenth century.

A SOCIETY OF LUMBERMEN

Their treaty with the colonial government meant that by the second half of the eighteenth century the Ndyuka's goal of an independent society had been reached. Ever since, their energies have been directed toward a quite different end: to get their share of the enormous wealth they knew was being generated in the Atlantic world.⁷ To reach this second goal they moved closer to the area where these riches were produced. Most went on a temporary basis, as migrant laborers. A minority moved permanently away from the remote Tapanahoni and close to what the Dutch called de *plantagekolonie* (the plantation colony), which comprised the capital Paramaribo and the plantations with their immediate environs, where the draconian law of the planters was the writ of the land. For the rest of Suriname, the Dutch authorities found a less-strict regime acceptable. Maroons inhabiting this second zone were allowed their own system of justice, as long as they did not resort to capital punishment. Nevertheless, Maroons occasionally did execute one of their own, usually for witchcraft. When that happened, the whites either didn't, or didn't want to, hear about it.

Around 1790, a group of Ndyuka settled near the confluence of Sara Creek and the Suriname River, just beyond the periphery of the plantation colony. Then, in the opening decades of the nineteenth century, while slavery was still going on and hundreds of slaves continued to escape into the rain forest,⁸ Ndyuka began establishing settlements within the plantation colony. Increasingly, they built their camps and villages along rivers in the coastal region, the Cottica, Courmotibo, and lower Saramacca. There they rubbed shoulders with the Saamaka and Matawai Maroons who had made similar moves.

Although subsistence gardening remained important to them, some Ndyuka men earned an income growing produce for Paramaribo or the plantations. But much more striking was that hundreds of Ndyuka men who had settled near the plantation economy participated in the logging industry. Many others migrated from the interior to the logging camps on a seasonal basis. As early as 1806, a government official noted that Mainsi, a Tapanahoni village, looked abandoned because "all the menfolk of this village are [logging] with the

Whites." This movement of migrant workers made it difficult to document actual population figures for the Ndyuka. In 1857, Kappler (1881:320), an official representing the colonial administration among the Ndyuka who had visited most Tapanahoni villages, calculated the total number of Tapanahoni Ndyuka at 700. A few years later, H. W. van Heerdt and Cateau van Rosevelt (1862) estimated the number of Tapanahoni Ndyuka at 600. A. M. Coster, writing in about the same period, arrived at the quite different figure of 4,000 to 5,000 Ndyuka (1866:23). The historian Wolbers (1861:764), basing himself on government statistics for 1858, mentioned 3,000 Ndyuka. Both Coster and Wolbers included the Ndyuka working in the coastal area in their totals. Clearly, the Ndyuka had moved in great numbers from their inland villages to the Coast.

As loggers, men actively needed the assistance of their matrilineal relatives. One or two men could fell a giant forest tree and remove its branches, but then the trunk had to be dragged to a nearby creek or river. Lacking horses or machines, a dozen or more relatives would haul it to the river bank, while children and the elderly pushed cylindrical sections of smaller trees under the trunk as rollers. Once they had reached the banks of a creek or river, the tree trunks would be tied together to make rafts that could then be puntered to a nearby saw mill. In those days, men lived together with their matrilineal and other relatives for many months each year, and the social life of Ndyuka lumberjacks reflected these strong interdependencies.

In the nineteenth century, each Ndyuka village, or lumberjack camp of a more permanent nature, was basically an independent republic. Most of its older men participated daily in the village councils where some older women, particularly those with many children, would also voice their opinions. Occasionally bitter disagreements occurred between full-fledged citizens and refugees (recently escaped slaves who were commonly exploited as cheap labor by the Ndyuka), and between elders and the *yonkuman* (young men) who were often excluded from the village councils. The community's daily affairs were settled through lengthy *kuutu*. Despite the younger generation's often expressed dissatisfaction, the key ideological tenet of consensus was greatly prized and supported by strong social leveling mechanisms. *Makandi libi* (cooperatively and harmoniously living together) and the practice of sharing among kinsmen and affines were deemed essential for the survival of nineteenth-century Ndyuka communities.

Consequently, these village democracies offered scant encouragement to the eccentric or the successful. Small-scale agricultural entrepreneurs, shamans with lucrative practices, and bounty hunters earning handsome fees for returning new Runaways to the planters, knew that differentiating themselves too much from the community could be dangerous: notably prosperous and stingy persons ran a con-

siderable risk of being accused of witchcraft. We have information on 15 Ndyuka who were executed as witches—or would have been, without protection from the colonial authorities. Two of these were women; among the men one was a village headman, two were independent agricultural entrepreneurs, and one was a successful shaman. But most were men who had founded the village of Poligudu after deserting (1805) from the corps of Black Rangers (the Dutch mercenary army) (Thoden van Velzen & van Wetering 1988:408).⁹

These former Black Rangers, or Lebimusu as the Ndyuka called them, had distinguished themselves in the war against the Aluku. It is a mystery to us why these deserters from the Dutch mercenary army became a target for aggression. Was it because they had fought against other Maroons? Unlikely, for the Ndyuka themselves had dealt the final blow to the Aluku rebels (Hoogbergen 1990:157–183). What is certain is that in return for giving them asylum, the Ndyuka demanded vassal labor: the Lebimusu were expected to work for many years in the Ndyuka's gardens and to build canoes for the established clans. Their situation gradually improved until they were accepted as a new Ndyuka clan by the end of the nineteenth century. But some 150 years later, horror stories of Lebimusu exploitation are still told in considerable detail. Tales from the preceding centuries also abound with entrepreneurs and shamans who fell victim to the leveling pressures of matrilineages. Their fate was just as horrible as those of the Lebimusu rebels, but this last category managed to strike back, or rather their ghosts struck back. The fate and revenge of a man named Atokwa is recalled by many Ndyuka.

A MAN BURNED AT THE STAKE

During the 1830s, Atokwa, a Ndyuka man, left his Tapanahoni village to settle in the coastal plain of the Cottica region, there to grow produce for the capital city and the plantations. When demand began to outstrip production, Atokwa hired laborers to help him tend his banana plantation. The people he employed were not Ndyuka but Caribs (Amerindians), and that likely irritated his fellow Ndyuka. But what certainly irked them was the financial success of his enterprise: he was making a good deal more money than the lumbermen around him. Attempts by others to follow him in growing food for the urban market ended in failure. Rumors began to circulate that Atokwa's accomplishments owed much to his witchcraft. Things came to a head when some claimed that they had taken a few overripe bananas from Atokwa's garden, but that "evil things" installed by Atokwa made them fall ill.

Neighboring Ndyuka of several matrilineages reached agreement that Atokwa would have to undergo the tribal poison ordeal, so that these accusations could be looked into properly. This consortium first

obtained the cooperation of Atokwa's Carib workers. The treacherous Caribs informed Atokwa of his impending danger and offered to smuggle him out of the area, beyond the reach of the Ndyuka investigators. Atokwa entrusted himself to his workers, who hid him under banana leaves in their boat. The boat was intercepted at a prearranged point by Atokwa's Ndyuka enemies; they trussed him up and carried him to the village of Puketi, the ancient Ndyuka capital, where the poison ordeal of Sweli Gadu (see chapter 5) was situated. Shortly after drinking the poisoned potion, Atokwa fell ill; this was considered definitive proof that he was a witch. Subsequently, in 1845, Atokwa was burned at the stake.

Atokwa was posthumously rehabilitated after his ghost visited the living to complain that they burned him unjustly, because he had never harmed anyone. "Where are my bones," the ghost asked through the mouth of a medium for (the Ndyuka explain) the fire had been so intense that even Atokwa's bones were destroyed. Today, Atokwa's ghost still haunts three Ndyuka matrilineages, which indicates that Atokwa had been killed by men and women from three different matrilineages.

THE GROWTH OF INEQUALITY AND THE NEW MAROONS

Already during the formative years of Maroon societies there were processes undermining the egalitarianism of Ndyuka relationships. The most important of these processes was the growth of groups—*foloku*, or "followings"—centered on powerful individuals, known as Big Men. A following was primarily a residential group; it became most visible on the northern frontier, near the plantations and the capital city. This area was a land of new opportunities for Maroons. There a Big Man could leave his imprint by forming a *foloku* without much interference on the part of lineage elders. *Foloku* usually began with some elders attracting persons other than their close matrilineal kin—their sons, for example, or some relations normally considered far removed. Prestigious shamans commanding powerful *obiya* were ideally placed to become Big Men, that is, to attract and consolidate their followings. Often individuals suspected of witchcraft in other villages or regions would try to join such a following. Alleged witches were totally dependent on their protectors and hence were considered more loyal and reliable than some of the Big Man's own close kin. They were also a source of cheap labor.

Opportunities for Big Men to increase their ranks of followers grew as waves of new Runaways (Lowe Sama) complicated the situation in the interior. During the peace negotiations of the 1760s, a major concern for the authorities in Paramaribo was the possibility that the villages of the "Pacified Bush Negroes"—as they called the post-treaty Maroons—would become havens for future fugitive slaves.

Articles 4 and 5 of the peace treaty between the Dutch and the Ndyuka specifically attempted to address this:

If any slave should defect to them after Amnesty and the Treaty and the signing thereof, they, the Maroons, shall be bound to return the same and surrender them to the whites without exception, for which they shall receive a due reward in money and kind. . . .

They, the Pacified Bush Negroes and their successors, shall do everything in their power to capture any slaves running away after the conclusion of this treaty, as well as any hostile Indians, and shall surrender the same [and], if necessary, kill them. Furthermore, they shall be bound to try and track down any runaway slaves immediately. (translation in de Groot 1977:11–12)

The colonial government had good reason for its concern. Each year more slaves fled the plantations, hoping to find a life free from yoke and whip. Some of these turned to the “Pacified Bush Negroes” for shelter. It is hard to generalize about the reception that these Runaways received. Some were handed over almost immediately to military posts or to *posthouders*, government representatives residing in Maroon territory. Many Runaways, however, did find asylum with the Ndyuka or Saamaka. Although their presence in Ndyuka villages was concealed, the *posthouders*, assisted by a few spies, would get wind of at least some of these refugees and demand their surrender.

In 1808, when a *posthouder* protested to Ma Akuba, a Ndyuka woman of the village of Mainsi, that there were four Runaways in her village, she replied that she did not feel like handing them over to the Europeans as long as the Paramount Chief was hiding many more in his village. In his report the *posthouder* confirmed that he knew of at least eight Runaways in the Gaanman’s residence. From another *posthouder’s* report of 1809 it is apparent that practically every village harbored a few refugees; in one village fifteen Runaways were reputed to have found shelter.¹⁰

Usually, the information available to a *posthouder* was less precise. Besides, this official had only one assistant and no means of enforcement, making it next to impossible to compel Ndyuka chiefs to return Runaways to the government. Dependent as he was on Ndyuka boatmen for his travels, there was little a *posthouder* could do but bring his complaints to the Gaanman. When he did, the *posthouder* usually left the Ndyuka Gaanman’s residence with every assurance that the matter would be looked into and that, if by any chance the Gaanman’s investigations should reveal the presence of Runaways, the fugitives would be handed over instantly. Usually little resulted from such maneuvers. If the *posthouder* brought incontrovertible evidence and the government put pressure on the Gaanman, Ndyuka leaders might send Runaways to Poligudu (the village of the rebel

Black Rangers, the Lebimusu) to perform odd jobs for their benefactors.¹¹ Undoubtedly, many fugitive slaves found refuge with Ndyuka in the period before Emancipation (1863). In 1829, several Ndyuka headmen, including the Gaanman, are known to have employed Runaways. Some of those New Maroons, who were later known as the Pamaka, are mentioned specifically as a group whose members worked for Ndyuka chiefs.¹² Ndyuka headmen who had settled in the coastal region also sheltered and exploited New Maroons.¹³

The refugees were gradually incorporated into existing Ndyuka kin groups, thus concealing their humble—in Ndyuka eyes—origins. The harboring of refugees caused constant friction between the Dutch and the Ndyuka, and occasionally resulted in tense political situations. These difficulties were addressed in the articles of the renewed peace treaty of 1837. General instructions for posthouders state that: “The postholder [*posthouder*] is emphatically urged to investigate with the greatest possible secrecy and discretion who are the chiefs of the villages guilty of harboring runaway slaves or in league with runaways” (translation in de Groot 1977:18).

The “runaway question” did more than strain relationships between Tapanahoni Ndyuka and the Dutch government in Paramaribo; it had repercussions for relations within Ndyuka society as well. Some Ndyuka elders exploited the Runaways as cheap labor, all the more important now that so many Ndyuka men had gone to the Coast to work as lumbermen. Runaways would clear a Big Man’s gardens, make dugout canoes for him, and work as trusted assistants when he consulted oracles or whenever discretion was called for. Most Captains and the Gaanman had access to this source of labor.

But over and beyond this, reliable followers were worth a great deal in a matrilineal society where an elder knew that his claims on the allegiance of younger kinsmen were always contested: fathers would endeavor to keep their sons with them, or a mother’s brother would put pressure on a sister’s son to show where his loyalties lay by taking up residence with his own matrilineage. With refugees, one could secure a foloku made up of people who had nowhere else to go. A Big Man’s following could usurp many ritual functions that ordinarily were the prerogative of the matrilineage. Ancestor worship, for example, rather than being the duty and privilege of the collectivity of elders of a matrilineage, might become a central concern to a Big Man and his assistants. However, the responsibility for kunu, avenging spirits, always remained the exclusive concern of the lineage.

LIFE ON THE NORTHERN FRONTIER

The no-man’s-land between the plantations and the Maroon villages of the interior had shrunk as a result of two forces eroding it:

Maroons coming from the south and establishing anything from temporary shelters to permanent villages in the coastal area, and the waves of Runaways who had settled in these regions after the peace treaties. This second group, some 5,000 strong (Coster 1866:6), built fortified villages and storage dumps in places as far apart as the Tempati Creek, the swamps between the Cottica River and the ocean, and the Surnau Creek. Some of these hidden settlements were quite close to the capital (less than twenty miles from the city) but were difficult to reach and well concealed in mangrove swamps. Almost yearly, military expeditions attempted to track down Runaways, and the upstream portion of the Surnau Creek became the scene of a vicious little war between the Dutch and the Runaways; the violence dragged on for decades. The last military engagement took place in 1862, only months before the abolition of slavery (Hoogbergen 1978:31–34, 1983:105–106).

Ndyuka attitudes toward the Runaways varied. Much depended on the manner in which first contacts were established and, of course, on the personalities of the people involved. In some cases Runaways owed their survival as a group to the Ndyuka who had incited them to “run away” to their villages and assisted them after they had escaped.¹⁴ In other instances, Ndyuka cultivated social contacts with Runaways, traded with them, or hired them for clearing fields or felling trees. But slaves who managed to reach the Tapanahoni River had to beg Ndyuka elders there for shelter and were put to work by them, doing all sorts of odd jobs with little or no recompense.

Often, however, on the Cottica River and the Sara and Surnau Creeks, Ndyuka repeatedly participated in military expeditions to overcome or capture Runaways, or they asked the colonial authorities to commission their patrols against them.¹⁵ Motives for this behavior seem to have been mixed: the handsome rewards promised by the planters for successful expeditions must have played a powerful role. But at other times, Runaways were fought because they posed a threat to a Ndyuka settlement or to the security of Ndyuka moving along the rivers that connected them with the outside world. Ndyuka feared the hideouts of Runaways as threatening nests of vipers full of dangerous obiya. The term “backwoods people” (bakabusi sama), used as a general name for these last waves of Maroons, assumed an ominous cast: these were people living too close to dangerous forest spirits (Ampuku) for decent folk to feel comfortable with. Bakabusi settlements were occasionally raided by apprehensive Ndyuka who, in some instances, also informed the colonial government of their location.

The small band of Runaways led by Amawi and Nelo is an exemplary case of the threat posed by Runaways to Ndyuka security. First, the gang terrorized the Pamaka, a group of Runaways whom the Ndyuka considered friendly neighbors. Stories about the tyrannical

rule of the twosome reached the Tapanahoni, engendering dismay. But when Amawi and Nelo's band began to ambush Ndyuka in the Wane Creek, a vital link connecting the Marowijne with the Cottica River (see fig. 1), a punitive expedition was mounted against them. The ensuing clash in central Marowijne territory finally broke the back of the gang by killing its two leaders. Two accounts of this episode exist, one collected among Ndyuka, the other among Pamaka.

Ndyuka Account

Endiikii (Hendrik) Amawi was evil! He did all sorts of bad things among the Pamaka. He also killed Ndyuka people near Anpoma [central section of the Marowijne]. If you were not courageous, and if you didn't have strong obiya, this was no place for you to go. This man [Amawi], with his assistant Nelo, would soon get the better of you, and kill you. The only way to escape death was to give them everything you had bought in Paramaribo. When these two men and their followers began to occupy part of Ndyuka territory, our ancestors called a great meeting. They selected a group of good warriors to remove these evil persons. Anike from Poligudu was appointed their leader. They fought with Amawi and Nelo at Anpoma. Anike was wounded, but the two ruffians were killed. Then we could do our shopping in Paramaribo in peace, and we had liberated the Pamaka.¹⁶

Pamaka Version

Endiikii Amawi, a Pamaka, courted a married woman [among the Pamaka], and thus provoked the traditional retaliation by the husband and his kinsmen, who have the right to beat the seducer, as long as they do so with their bare hands. But Amawi did not play by traditional rules: he fought back, and defended himself with a club against their fists. [According to cultural expectations, he should have tried to escape, as defending oneself is a breach of custom]. He would certainly have been found guilty and fined by the council of elders, but Amawi did not wait for their judgment. He made his way through the forest until he reached Poligudu, the first Ndyuka village. He married a Ndyuka woman, and settled in Poligudu. But then the Ndyuka Gaanman got wind of this. The Gaanman decided to turn him over to the Europeans for money. One night, on the way to the coast, Amawi managed to untie his ropes, and escape into the forest. He returned to the Pamaka settlement. Shortly after his return a Ndyuka delegation arrived there to request Amawi's deliverance. The Pamaka Gaanman, Da Dofen, promised the Ndyuka to hand over the man. Amawi overheard this conversation, went into hiding until the Ndyuka delegation had left, and then murdered Dofen in his makeshift garden hut. Amawi cut off his victim's genitals and placed these into Dofen's mouth. By ambushing and killing a Ndyuka, Amawi obtained a gun and machetes. With these arms he returned to the

Pamaka who, in the first part of the nineteenth century, had no weapons to speak of. From this position of power, Amawi could order them to accept his friend Nelo as their Paramount Chief. When the Ndyuka heard about the events among the Pamaka, they decided to intervene. An expedition was mounted, and two men from Poligudu killed Amawi.¹⁷

A SOCIETY OF BOATMEN

With the discovery of gold between 1880 and 1885, the hinterland of the Guianas became a focus of international economic interest (Lacroix 1970:110). Several gold rushes attracted thousands of miners to the headwaters of the rivers of Suriname and French Guiana. The dense tropical rain forest forced gold miners to use river transport to reach the remote placers. This, however, was fraught with obstacles and dangers. Boatmen followed rivers that originate far to the south, in the mountains on the Brazilian border. Formidable rapids and waterfalls are first encountered some 40 to 70 kilometers from the Coast, to reappear every five or ten kilometers thereafter. Prospectors searching for El Dorado needed the Maroons to unlock the interior for them, because only they possessed a means of transportation adapted to these shallow, treacherous waters: their dug-out canoes. Maroon pilots knew their way through the continually shifting rapids. Amerindians, their only potential rivals, were too few in number to affect the



Figure 5 Maroons hauling boats through rapids. (Source: Crevaux, 1883)

transport market, and those who were available were employed by prospectors as guides.

Bagasiman (Maroon freight haulers) soon gained a monopoly over river transport in Suriname and French Guiana; their services were much sought after by companies operating in the Sara Creek region of central Suriname, and in French Guiana the demand for river transport was even stronger. There Maroons were working for miners and companies on the Mana, Sinnamary, Approuague, Conté, and Oyapock rivers. In about the same period, demand by local entrepreneurs extracting *balata* (wild rubber) also peaked. Their presence on the Mana River is mentioned as early as 1886 (Brunetti 1890:239; Bureau 1936:96). Gold production in Dutch and French Guiana reached its peak between 1880 and 1915, sustaining demand for river transport throughout this period. Even after the euphoria of the gold rush was spent, enough placers had been opened up and enough laborers employed to require the regular services of a great number of boat crews. In French Guiana, the number of independent gold miners and laborers for gold companies was estimated at 6,000 in 1902, 12,000 in 1911, 10,000 in 1926 and 4,500 in 1936 (Dupont-Gonin 1970:241).

Within the relatively short period between 1885 and 1890, the great majority of Ndyuka men exchanged their lives as lumberjacks for the far more lucrative work of river transporters servicing the gold-mining industry. This radical reorientation of economic interests caused significant dislocations in social relationships because it led to inequalities in the distribution of wealth. Boatmen were prosperous and above all *independent* entrepreneurs, earning much more money than their parents and grandparents ever made in logging. However, because not *every* Ndyuka profited from the bonanza, trouble arose between those who worked in transportation and those who, for whatever reason, did not.

Patterns of economic cooperation among river transporters were quite different from those existing in the logging camps. Once bagasiman had moved to navigate French Guiana's rivers, their fortunes no longer depended on the assistance of relatives. One's son or sister's son and/or a friendly colleague would suffice as help for the boat owner, for there were seldom more than three men to a crew. So when the boatmen returned to their Ndyuka villages they were no longer dependent on their matrilineal relatives. In fact, relatives had become a liability. In turn-of-the-twentieth-century Ndyuka society, bagasiman were rich men who owned the chief means of production, their boats. They could circumvent dependency relationships with their own and their wives' matrilineages (the owners of the swidden plots) by buying their food elsewhere, and they were not dependent on the labor of their kinsmen.

Although this book will not attempt to offer an explanation for the many Ndyuka religious movements it will discuss, we would draw the

reader's attention to the consequences of the socioeconomic dislocations just mentioned. Around 1890—thus at the zenith of the Ndyuka economy's conversion from egalitarian lumbering to river transport's economic differentiation—the Gaan Tata religious regime established itself firmly in every area where Ndyuka lived, and in some other Maroon communities as well. We have argued and documented elsewhere that the new economic disparities among Maroons after 1885 contributed greatly to the witch crazes and the iconoclastic campaigns of the 1890s, and the Gaan Tata regime played a signal role in first promoting and then regulating social turmoil (Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 1988:387–389).

THE END OF THE GOLDEN YEARS AND THE BEGINNING OF NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Maroon prosperity peaked around 1915 and then declined. During the 1920s, as old placers became exhausted and new balata bleeding (natural rubber tapping) territories became more remote, the demand for river transport slackened. In just a few years, the shortage in transport capacity changed into a surplus. Not until the late 1950s, when Suriname's colonial government decided to open the interior with its presumed riches, did new opportunities arise for bagasiman. Then, once again, Maroon boatmen brought prospectors and laborers deep into the hinterland with dug-out canoes, but this time these were powered with outboard motors.

Even more important was the exodus of Suriname's citizens (roughly a third of the population) to the Netherlands in the years prior to independence (1975). As Maroons bought shops, trucks, buses, and real estate from those fleeing the country, a new class of entrepreneurs developed. At the time of our first fieldwork (1961–1962), no new wave of prosperity had yet reached Tapanahoni villages. But this was soon to change, with hundreds of Maroons settling in the capital city while retaining contact with their relatives in the interior. For the second time in Maroon economic history, their societies became subject to centrifugal forces as the gap between rich and poor widened. Many of those who had found a government job, or had succeeded in establishing themselves as small entrepreneurs in the urban milieu, felt increasingly uneasy about their impoverished relations back home. Later we will link their apprehensions to the witch-cleansing movements of the 1970s. Today many Ndyuka still reside in Suriname's interior, approximately in the same area where their society evolved after their hard-won freedom more than two centuries earlier.

During the last three decades, thousands have migrated to Paramaribo and to the Netherlands. As a result of Suriname's civil war (1986–1992), which pitted the National Army against a sizeable por-

tion of the Maroon population in the interior, many Ndyuka took up permanent residence in Paramaribo. Another 8,000 or 9,000 fled Suriname to settle in French Guiana. As we will see later, the civil war itself was started by young urbanized Maroon men looking for a bigger share of the riches flaunted by the military rulers, who were opportunistic upstarts themselves. If the military who had chased the civilian government from power could live in luxury, why not their bodyguards and spies, many of them of Maroon extraction?

The war did much to deepen the rift between rich and poor Maroons, between the profiteers and their backwoods kin. Thrown back on their own resources, the young and aggressive opened new placer mines, and often found Brazilian miners willing to work for them. In the Wild West atmosphere that ensued—almost a replay of the past—there was little to guarantee the dependents a share in the new wealth. Ndyuka could not help comparing themselves with the Aluku, who lived for the most part in French Guiana, and were therefore eligible for the social welfare benefits of a European nation. Real income differences, deepened by a sense of relative deprivation, favored a growing preoccupation with the forces of evil. The demon craze of the last decades seems linked to these new economic disparities.

Notes

- ¹ Bax's definition is somewhat different from ours: "A religious regime could be defined as a formalized and institutionalized constellation of human interdependencies of variable strength, which is legitimized by religious ideas and propagated by religious specialists." But one sentence later he adds: "... religious regimes are power constellations. ..."
- ² For those not familiar with the work of Francis and Melville J. Herskovits, we would like to stress that their work on another Afro-Surinamese civilization, the Creoles of Paramaribo, is still considered a classic (Herskovits & Herskovits 1936).
- ³ The full title is even more interesting: "Africa's Lost Tribes in South America: An On-the-Spot Account of Blood-chilling African Rites of 200 Years Ago Preserved Intact in the Jungles of South America."
- ⁴ André Köbben (personal communication) wrote a short letter to the editors of *Newsweek* pointing out that the number of publications on Maroons exceeded 1,000. The letter was not accepted for publication.
- ⁵ A letter to the editor of *Newsweek*, by D. H. van der Elst (1974), protesting this distortion of the historical record, was brushed aside by the two "discoverers."
- ⁶ The year 1962 showed a peak in condemnations of witchcraft. Of 30 cases of postmortem divination, no less than 21 pointed in the direction of witchcraft (van Wetering 1996:371).
- ⁷ For illuminating discussions of the concept of the Atlantic world, see Palmié 1995:xvi–xxii, 2002:108–109; Thornton 2000:55–73.
- ⁸ Coster (1866:6), basing himself on his long-term residence among the Ndyuka of the 1850s, estimates the number of Maroons at 8,000.
- ⁹ On the rebellion of the black mercenaries, see de Groot 1970, 1988, 1989; Hoogbergen 1990:184–185.
- ¹⁰ For 1808, see HVP, code 1.05.10.02, letter #967; letter of Callenburgh Kelderman, 15 November 1808; HVP, 967, 15 February 1809; HVP 196, 24 June 1809.
- ¹¹ That Ndyuka sought shelter for Runaways at Poligudu is mentioned in a letter to the Court of Policy at Paramaribo, HVP 189, Minutes of Defense, 1807.

- ¹² Compare CIB, code 1.05.11.06; filed under 1:83, 18 November 1829.
- ¹³ For the Cottica River, see CIB 1:31, 19 June 1929. For the Commewijne River, see CIB 1846, letter of Heemraad to Paramaribo, 28 July 1846; and NWI: 816, no. 66b, 16 January 1833.
- ¹⁴ CIB 1846, letter of Heemraad Niefeld, 28 July 1846.
- ¹⁵ For the Cottica, see NWI 810:491, 13 August 1831; NWI 820:66, 29 January 1834; CIB 3, 31 March 1834; NWI 308, 27 August 1845; KOL 3417, GJ, 13 September 1847. For the Sara Creek, see NWI 820:36, 13 January 1834; and CIB 4, 8 January 1835. For the Surnau Creek, see NWI 804:502, 4 November 1830; NWI 807:502, 26 October 1830; NWI 808:61, 28 January 1831; NWI 310, October 1845.
- ¹⁶ Interview with Da Kasiayeki, Fisiti village, 18 May 1981. Kasiayeki emphasized the tyrannical rule of the two men over the Pamaka Maroons, whom they had joined at a fairly late stage in their history. Loth (1880) also mentions the actions of "the ruffians Amani and Nero" and reports how they threatened to stop all traffic through the Wane Creek. Loth's Amani and Nero are undoubtedly the Amawi and Nelo of these stories.
- ¹⁷ Condensed version of Lenoir's (1973:68–72) account of the life of Endiikii Amawi.

The Oracle and the Ghost

A CONFRONTATION

Throughout the twentieth century, the Ndyuka continued to enjoy considerable autonomy under their own political and religious leadership: a Gaanman, their Kabiten, and the priests of several African-American cults. These cults quite often contended for bigger shares of the therapeutic market and, since 1963,¹ for the patronage spoils of influential politicians in Paramaribo. The story we are about to relate deals with the emergence and waning of several enduring religious movements that periodically flower into prominence, then disappear for a decade or more, only to return with renewed vigor at some later stage.

During 1961, we initiated anthropological fieldwork among the Ndyuka Maroons in the village of Diitabiki, the seat of the Gaanman on the Tapanahoni River, a tributary of the Marowijne, which forms the border with French Guiana. Seen from Suriname's capital, Diitabiki was a remote place, tucked away deep into the South American rain forest. But it soon became clear to us that this distant village, with less than 1,000 inhabitants, was a center of religious and political activity. Only a few days after our arrival, we stumbled on a religious gathering that would prove to be a key to this culture that has so long shielded itself from whites and other strangers. Early one morning, some 50 elders from Diitabiki and most of the other 30 Tapanahoni villages, congregated in front of the Chief's house, near one of the village's main boat landings. We greeted each and every one of the elders

in the elaborate manner this culture requires. However, each of these same elders then picked up his *bangi* (a low stool) and walked away in the direction of the village square where, judging from the volume of noise, many Ndyuka were assembling. No one invited us to accompany them. Obviously, we were not welcome at their meeting. But the wind wafted strange sounds; people were singing in a language we were not familiar with, a vernacular that was neither coastal Creole nor Ndyuka. The temptation to move closer to the event proved to be too great: we walked to the small village square.

It was packed with hundreds of people. Although we kept to the periphery of the meeting, watching the happenings from a distance, we couldn't help noticing the embarrassed expressions on the faces of the elders with whom we had so enthusiastically exchanged greetings only minutes earlier. We became overwhelmed with the feeling of being excluded, of being Bakaa. Clearly, this center of village life was off-limits to us. For a few awkward minutes we sat there, two white faces at the edge of a sea of black ones. Then two headmen (renowned among Ndyuka for their tact in dealing with Outsiders, we later learned) approached us with the request to visit their relatives in another part of the village. One of the two men begged us to grant his bed-ridden, dying sister her one and perhaps only chance to meet those wonderful white people she had heard so much about. Certainly, this headman argued, the honor of receiving us would be great. Could we please do her this favor? There was little else we could do but comply with this kind invitation—or rather, this politely phrased order to leave the premises—and so the two headmen led us from the central square to a distant part of the village. There we met with a second surprise: the bed-ridden, dying sister appeared to have made a remarkable recovery. “She has gone to her gardens,” her neighbors told us. The headmen thanked us profusely for our intended visit, took leave of us in the most cordial manner, and suggested that we repair to our house to enjoy a hearty breakfast. We couldn't resist asking what it was that we had seen. When the second headman responded to our questions with: “What you have witnessed was an ancient ritual,” his colleague quickly silenced him. We decided to accept our fate, and we returned to our house in a part of the village that looked abandoned. A few hours later, when the meeting appeared to have ended, several elders stopped by for an amiable chat and a cup of instant coffee. None of our gracious visitors referred to the fact that the two Outsiders, we two anthropologists, had stumbled upon one of Ndyuka society's most numinous and shielded institutions.

Nevertheless, we had managed to catch a glimpse of what those secrets entailed. When glued to our places at the periphery of the meeting, behind a row of children, we experienced a singular sight. In the middle of the square moved a weird construction (see frontispiece).

In this case its two bearers were visible, although it took us some time to see them as separate from the thing they carried on their heads. It was a plank, heavily laden with draperies that hung to the ground and adorned with little bells that tinkled as they moved. The bearers and their mysterious object made jerky and unexpected movements. It was an impressive and awesome sight.

Many weeks later, we learned that we had seen the Gaan Gadu or Bigi Gadu or Gaan Tata oracle. One of the three supreme deities of the Ndyuka, he is considered the most strict and uncompromising of all supernatural beings. When covens of witches once threatened the survival of Ndyuka society, the people begged the deity to intercede and exterminate the social vermin. Gaan Tata, as we will call him from now on, consented to deal with the witches ruthlessly, on the condition that the people he so protected would obey his divine rules strictly. Gaan Tata was and still is the divine disciplinarian in the eyes of Ndyuka. Only Masaa Gadu occupies a higher place in their pantheon, but He usually does not intervene in human affairs.

The deity's tabernacle is hidden from view; only a lump under a voluminous pack of drapes betrays its presence. Lifted by two priests, this moving tabernacle serves as Gaan Tata's mouthpiece, causing its bearers to move in answer to questions. During the 1960s, the oracle was consulted four or five times a week by patients seeking a divine diagnosis, or by village headmen and other elders uncertain of the proper political course to take and, more generally, for any and all matters of public concern. During those years, the oracle's High Priest was also the Ndyuka Gaanman, a functionary recognized and salaried by the government of Suriname and used as its main intermediary for implementing administration policy. The importance and range of issues brought before the Gaan Tata oracle, as well as the regularity of oracular sessions, made this religious institution the dominant political apparatus in the eastern part of Suriname. ✓

In front of the awesome tabernacle stood a playfully mischievous young woman who appeared to be less than thirty years old. She sang in a language we did not understand while adopting unusual postures and walking about in a stiff manner, clearly in a trance. She greeted each of the village headmen and elders formally, as if she were a European official, and walked around in a stiff, military manner while cursing in coarse Dutch. This was our first glance of Sa (sister) Kaabu, the medium of a ghost and several other spirits. The business that brought Kaabu to the oracle involved a story so complicated that its plots and subplots need to be told in stages. At that time, about the only thing we understood was that she was apparently possessed by the spirit of a slain Dutch officer. What was, however, abundantly clear to us is that it was Kaabu who had told the Gaanman during that first encounter with the oracle that the two white persons should v.p. 17

be ordered to leave. "No Gaanman, they should leave," we heard her say. A couple of months later, when we had found a house in Diitabiki, Kaabu paid us a courtesy visit. Surrounded by her maids in waiting, she said something like: "We met before, but at that time the Father was upon me, and we couldn't speak."

✓ All Ndyuka spirit mediums, if they wish to be taken seriously outside of their kin groups, have to present themselves to Gaan Tata's oracle to be recognized as the authentic vessel of a spirit. The oracle's priests must have confirmed Kaabu as a legitimate medium, otherwise she would not have been granted permission to portray herself to the audience in such a dramatic manner. In subsequent stages of a medium's career, rapport with the spirit must be secured so that its identity and reason for visiting can be determined. Prominent members of the oracle's staff—priests, shamans, or elders—question the spirit.

Speaking through Kaabu's mouth, the ghost responded to such questioning by telling the gathering that his name was Dominiki, a man recognized as one in a long line of Ndyuka prophets. Around 1920, Dominiki had rekindled the ancient Ogii (Danger) cult, which had dominated religious and political life in Ndyuka Tapanahoni society for more than a decade from approximately 1915 until 1932. During this seance, the spirit of the Dutch officer remained in the background. We never succeeded in getting people to talk about the Dutchman's ghost.

The message was disturbing but hardly surprising in its import; ghosts, though common, do not usually haunt the living for trivial purposes. Dominiki's spirit put the following case before the Ndyuka people. When, in 1932, a rival movement had destroyed Dominiki's shrines, all his followers deserted him. What hurt him most, however, was the defection of his wife, Ma Beke. She had forced him to divorce his other wives, then persuaded her family not to allow their many children to accompany Dominiki when he fled to the safety of Ndyuka settlements in the coastal area, close to police posts. Dominiki's last years were spent in utter deprivation. Partly disabled, he could not even walk to the riverbank to draw water. The villagers were not willing to come to the assistance of a man who had arrived unaccompanied by any relatives. His house fell into disrepair, his roof leaked when it rained. Dominiki had been reduced to collecting rainwater in empty sardine cans to quell his thirst.

✓ When Dominiki's ghost returned, it manifested itself as a kunu, which delivered the message that it would avenge itself for this gross neglect. Even though Ma Beke, Dominiki's callous wife, had died many years earlier, her matrilineal relatives and descendants could be made to suffer. The ghost that spoke through Kaabu's mouth announced that its revenge would be the total extermination of Ma Beke's matrilineage.

THE STAGE AND ITS CONTEXT

No one will have difficulty understanding the fact that two inquisitive anthropologists were kindly asked to leave: they were at the wrong place at the wrong time. The only thing that this episode teaches us is that the Ndyuka had, so far, been successful in protecting their religious institutions against mission Christianity and at the same time keeping Outsiders, whether whites or blacks (non-Maroon, Afro-Surinamese) away from their sacred places.²

Gaan Tata's two oracles are situated in Diitabiki and Gaanboli. In the early 1890s, Gaan Tata spearheaded a massive antiwitchcraft campaign (see chapter 7). The deity is also pictured as a defender of traditional Ndyuka culture, upholding menstrual taboos and persecuting thieves, adulterers, and homosexuals. Most oral history accounts insist that Gaan Tata came from Africa, to comfort the slaves and then help them escape. The vanguard of the Runaways, who later became known as Ndyuka, carried Gaan Tata's tabernacle with them. Like the God of the Old Testament who opened the waters of the Red Sea for the Jews fleeing the Egyptians, Gaan Tata helped the Runaways penetrate the rain forest. But when they settled in their new environment on the Mama Ndyuka Creek, twenty miles north of the Tapanahoni, he could not help them anymore. He was as much a stranger to this forest environment as they were. Infant mortality was extremely high and there were other disturbing signs that the Ndyuka, and their god, were not accepted by the local supernaturals.

Diviners soon discovered that they had unwittingly invaded the territory of another god they called Ogii, one who considered this rain forest his natural abode. Some Ndyuka claimed that they had seen him moving upriver with his canoe, but making no discernible effort at all to propel it. His appearance was described as brown and reddish, like an Amerindian. Fortunately for the Ndyuka, an understanding was reached between the two divine beings. Under certain conditions, Ogii was willing to tolerate the Ndyuka people in his area. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the Ndyuka, whether through greed or stupidity, managed to offend Ogii, causing him to punish them. He reminded the Ndyuka on many occasions of their shortcomings, and early in the 1960s he did so again.

PANDORA'S BOX

Ghosts haunt Ndyuka society, erupting suddenly into the politics and disputes of the present. During the oracular sessions we witnessed, Dominiki's ghost not only put fear into the hearts of Ma Beke's matrilineal relatives but also intimated that the god Ogii himself lurked in the wings, aggrieved by the treatment extended to his prophet,

Dominiki. There were other reasons for the outrage Ogii felt, including motives of revenge. Whereas the ghost's anger focused exclusively on Dominiki's wife's relatives, the god lashed out against all Ndyuka. The story began to involve increasingly more Ndyuka and to confront them with further dirty secrets. Kaabu had opened Pandora's box.

During the nineteenth century, Ogii had assumed the human shape of a Ndyuka by the name of Dikii, a great shaman, a skilled hunter, a hated womanizer, and above all a fiercely competitive and aggressive man. The number of his enemies grew steadily, so that when rumors implicated Dikii in witchcraft, his own relatives betrayed him. They delivered him into the hands of the priests of Sweli Gadu, an ancient Ndyuka cult that then controlled the tribal poison ordeal. Dikii was brought twice before Sweli, and then released for lack of evidence. But the humiliation he received at the priests' hands bit deep into Dikii's soul: he sank into a state of depression and finally died. His corpse was left unburied, in the classic punishment for those convicted of witchcraft after death. Ogii charged the Ndyuka with the betrayal, humiliation, and murder of Dikii, his human vessel, and singled out the successors to the custodians of the poison ordeal, the priests of Gaan Tata, as the ones primarily responsible for this heinous offense.

Around 1900, Ogii began to avenge himself on the Ndyuka through his first prophet Akule (see chapter 10). Dominiki was later charged with the task of completing the divine mission of revenge through feasts of atonement held by Ogii's former enemies, and instituted services of worship for the spirit. But before Dominiki could declare that the kunu had received full compensation, his shrines were torched and the humiliated medium was chased from his own village. Then, a generation later, Kaabu claimed in trance that Ogii had returned to exact retribution.

Posing as Ogii's medium was a daring move for Kaabu. Her claim to mediumship of Dominiki's ghost had been supported by Gaan Tata's priests and by most of Dominiki's descendants. Claiming to be a medium for the god who had once possessed Dominiki raised the stakes considerably. When she gained recognition by the tribal council, Ogii's adepts launched a campaign to undermine Kaabu's legitimacy by questioning whether "a female who each month has to withdraw for several days to the menstrual seclusion hut can be an appropriate medium for the god named Ogii." After a year it became clear that Kaabu had failed in her more ambitious claim. From then on, people respected her only as Dominiki's vessel. And although even that claim was not fully endorsed by all of Dominiki's former assistants, she enjoyed considerable prestige in Tapanahoni society. This is a report from 1 January 1962.

At *Yali*. New Year's day, an important day in the Ndyuka religious calendar, Kaabu invited us to accompany her on a ceremonial trip

that would take her and her company to all the places where Dominiki's followers had once lived. We traveled in two boats, one for Kaabu, two elder men who had once worked for Dominiki, and Kaabu's guests, the anthropologists. The other boat was for her retinue, eight young women known for their beauty and vocal talents. We first traveled to Sanbendumi [see fig. 2 in chapter 1], a village where some of Dominiki's followers, now old men and women, lived. When Kaabu's boat moored at the village's landing, a man appeared on the bank high above us, asking her questions in a language we could not understand. Kaabu was being interrogated on her knowledge of Dominiki's life and *obiya*, that much was clear. Apparently the conversation didn't go well for the chorus girls stayed silent. Kaabu must have not passed the test, for we did not disembark there. p. 19

During the journey upstream, we stopped at some rock formations in the river. Kaabu's assistants uttered a few words, threw *pemba* [white kaoline clay] at the rocks and, at a sign from Kaabu, the boatmen started their motors again and we continued our voyage. Things took a different turn when we approached the Godoolo villages where Dominiki had lived most of his life, and where his main shrines had been. Hundreds of people came to the shore; the chorus started singing, Kaabu's assistants were standing, shouting esoterica at the people on the shore. There, a number of older men replied, also in a secret language. These, it was pointed out to us, were mediums of *sudati* [soldier] spirits, followers of Dominiki, who allegedly spoke various European languages. Some men and women became possessed and started singing, dancing, and wading into the river to welcome Kaabu and her party. After disembarkation the spirit medium dance continued. A quarter of an hour later, the Captains of the Godoolo villages approached Kaabu and formally invited her to enter the villages. Colorful cloths were put down in front of her so that her feet need not touch the ground. Kaabu, her assistants, and the anthropologists were brought to an empty house, where an hour later a meal was served. Kaabu and her assistants continued talking in a language that was not Ndyukatongo.

When, after a couple of months, we began to understand what had been at stake on the day that Kaabu appeared before the Gaan Tata oracle, we realized we had witnessed the birth of a new phase in the continuing struggle of two religious regimes. The history of Ndyuka coincides to a very large extent with the histories of two ideologies: Gaan Tata's and Ogi's. The following chapters will examine both traditions. ✓

Notes

¹ Independence came to Suriname in 1975, but elections for a representative assembly were held since 1954. In 1963, Maroons in the interior were given the right to vote. As half of the seats in the assembly are allotted on the basis of a district system, the votes of a few thousands Maroons were eagerly solicited.

² See also our reflection on this in chapter 17.

A Typical Day at the Gaan Tata Oracle

TAPANAHONI ORACLES

The Ndyuka of the Tapanahoni River have several ways to learn the opinion of their gods. Most often, as in the case of Kaabu, spirits and ghosts speak through mediums, humans possessed by a supernatural being. Every Tapanahoni village has a couple of regularly consulted mediums. Then too, as the second chapter showed, some gods reside in objects—a tabernacle, in the case of Gaan Tata. For divinations, specialists usually carry such a reliquary on a plank on their heads; its answers to questions are indicated by the way the spirit or deity makes its bearers move. Probably every village has such an *afaaka* (carry oracle). Unlike some mediums, carry oracles are not typically consulted on a regular basis. Only in emergencies would people “activate” the *afaaka* by taking it out of its shrine to be consulted in the open. Gaan Tata’s carry oracle, however, was questioned almost every day and for all sorts of reasons. In the thirty villages along the Tapanahoni, fewer than half a dozen oracles function in that manner. Prominent among these are the Gaan Tata oracles of the villages of Diitabiki and Gaanboli.

During the months following our ejection from our first encounter with the oracle, our relations with Gaan Tata’s priests gradually improved. Four months after our arrival we were officially invited to be present whenever the god’s tabernacle was consulted. During the early 1960s we recorded about a hundred such oracular sessions. They tend to follow a general pattern.

PERSONNEL

In charge is the *Basi fu a gadu wooko*, which literally means "Chief or boss of the god's work," hereafter called the High Priest. During the early 1960s, the High Priest was also Gaanman, the tribe's Paramount Chief, a combination of functions that is not considered exceptional in this society. He is assisted by three to five *wookoman fu a gadu*, literally "god's laborers," hereafter called priests. The oracle is carried by two men, locally known as *tyai gaduman*, "the deity's bearers." The movements of the oracle are interpreted by one or more *takiman* (priests charged with the interpretation of the oracle's movements). These "interpreters" are often supported by a few Kabiten (Captains or village headmen) or well-known elders invited by the High Priest from among the audience to serve also as *takiman*, interpreters. Last but not least, the meeting is presided over by a *pikiman*, a speaker.

Shortly after the sun has risen over the Tapanahoni River, the priests assemble in front of their High Priest's house to wish him a good morning and to receive instructions for the day. The High Priest then decides whether this will be a day for consulting the oracle. On Saturdays and Sundays that is almost always the case, for on those days many elders are expected to attend because religious taboos forbid them to work their gardens. During the brief early morning meeting, the High Priest discusses the agenda for the coming *gadu kuutu*



Figure 6 Priests and elders waiting for Gaan Tata in front of his temple (Diitabiki, 1962).

(palaver with the deity), and determines which patients or persons seeking divine counsel (whom we refer to as clients or clientele) will be allowed to appear before the oracle for divination and therapy.

The oracle's clientele comes from practically every village along the Tapanahoni, and in some cases from more distant Ndyuka regions. In 1962, the oracle was consulted on approximately 125 days for a total of 424 cases. Most of those who solicited Gaan Tata's help were ill; they came to find the cause and the cure for their illnesses. Although their problems were usually attributed to supernatural causes, occasionally living individuals (village headmen who had not been zealous enough in demonstrating their loyalty to the oracle's staff, for example) were held directly responsible. 3.4 / day

Palavers with the deity begin between eight and ten in the morning, and last until twelve or, at the latest, two in the afternoon. An hour before the session starts, the second-ranking priest strikes a gong to announce that the deity will be consulted that day. This signal is also known as the "breakfast gong," because once the proceedings are underway it would be improper for elders to excuse themselves for a "bite." Shortly before the session is opened, the gong is struck again to summon the priests and elders for their assembly in front of the temple. It stands in a small square shaded by an almond tree, in the center of the village—the very square where we first encountered Ndyuka priests and a medium. The temple is a simple building, a large hut with an upper floor (*sodoo*) where Gaan Tata's oracle rests. Materially, the oracle consists of a plank, a tabernacle, and votive cloths. The tabernacle itself is a small bundle said to contain sacred objects such as the hair and nails of famous ancestors, some wool and cotton balls, *fu tapu syen*, "to cover their private parts" (van Lier 1919:12). Scores of colorful cloths are draped over the sacred bundle, making it voluminous and a heavy load for its bearers.

The priests are often the first to appear on the scene. When they arrive, they take their assigned seats under the roof-overhang of the temple. Slowly the elders start drifting in, carrying their wooden stools. They bare their heads and take their places. The number of elders participating in an oracular session ranges from fifteen to eighty, but normally fluctuates between twenty and forty. Typically one of the earliest to arrive, Gaanman and High Priest Akontu spends his time in amiable conversation, exchanging homilies with his lieutenants. He discusses his night's rest, the quality of his breakfast, the poor prospect for a hearty meal that day, the fury of last night's storm, and the pranks of his younger children.

When all the oracle's dignitaries and Diitabiki's most influential elders have assembled, Akontu signals one of his assistants to fetch the sacred bundle from the shrine's upper floor. With some difficulty the assistant carries the bundle down the steep stairs and with the help of

some others places the ends of the plank on the heads of the two specialists known as tyai gaduman. These priests position themselves with their heavy load at the center of the assembly, facing the High Priest. People then wait for Gaan Tata to reveal himself, which may take anywhere from thirty seconds to ten minutes. All the while, the bearers stand motionless, looking straight ahead. Occasionally, especially if the deity keeps them waiting long before putting in his appearance, they join in the profane discussion going on around them, until suddenly it is made clear to one and all that Gaan Tata is present: his "divine vehicle" has started circling as the front bearer moves sideways while the rear one remains in roughly the same spot. Coming full circle they stop, with the front bearer once again facing the High Priest. By this rotation the deity has made it known that he is ready for consultation. All present now clap hands rhythmically to greet Gaan Tata.

The High Priest begins by wishing the deity a good day. From the movements of the oracle one can tell that the deity responds in kind. The interpreters now take up position in front of the tabernacle. Gaan Tata replies to questions through the bearers' movements: a forward move signifies affirmative, a backward or sideways one a negative response. Wild and chaotic movements indicate the god's displeasure with certain questions or with a particular subject. If this mobile oracle nudges a person, it means that the relationship between the deity and the individual thus singled out needs further investigation. There are many other signs as well: running to the forest's edge means imminent danger. Most of the signs are more subtle; a slight bow of the bearer's head, or a barely discernable move, may lead to a new line of questioning. Occasionally, when the deity's position remains unclear, the front bearer may verbalize Gaan Tata's wishes.

This dialogue between god and priests is always distant enough from the laymen so that they cannot overhear what is being discussed. The High Priest is clearly in charge of the oracle: after receiving a whispered report from a subordinate priest, he or, in less important matters, his first priest, issues a final communiqué to the speaker, who then asks those gathered whether they have understood the deity's words. After affirmation has been achieved, the speaker continues, issuing the definitive communiqué, bringing various communications about the case together in one final summary.

As a rule, the oracle's sessions are held in public. The elders of Diitabiki and nearby villages are expected to attend them. These elders, not themselves priests of Gaan Tata, form a "third power," which remains uninvolved when a dispute arises between the oracle's staff and its clientele. They are called lanti, meaning "representatives of the people." We will sometimes call them "neutrals" because they function theoretically as a mediating power between priests and clientele. But neutrality can hardly be expected at the oracle. Usually, the

neutrals operate as a clique for Gaan Tata's priests, as does the speaker. The lanti do, however, serve at least one of the roles of a defense attorney: they beg the priests to mete out a lesser punishment than first was announced. This is expected of them, and their request is usually granted.

The following examples of typical consultations were drawn from our field notes.

Neglect of the Ancestors

A Captain who was greatly disliked by the Gaanman for his independent political stance came to consult Gaan Tata's oracle at Diitabiki. His wife had fallen ill, and although her condition did not appear all that serious, he consented to escort her to the oracle to enlist the priests' assistance. But when the deity spoke, the Captain, to his considerable dismay, found himself rebuked for placing in jeopardy not only his wife's health, but that of all her relatives and even his own village. The illness of the headman's wife was, according to Gaan Tata, of the gravest nature. From where we were sitting¹ we could see the patient walking around, apparently cheerfully. This unpleasant message was brought home to him by the interpreters after they asked the oracle questions and then observed the movements of his sacred bundle. The priests blamed the Captain for being the source of all this misery: his dangerous neglect of his wife's ancestors had caused their wrath, and in retaliation the spirits had visited a sickness upon the unfortunate woman. The priests then announced a stiff fee for treating the patient, to be paid by the headman personally.

It was clear from this example—and we collected many similar cases—that the possibilities for manipulating public opinion constituted a formidable political weapon. The Captain's position had been undermined as punishment for his not being sufficiently submissive. Other headmen with similar inclinations to publicly demonstrate their independence now knew what to expect. The priests had made little effort to camouflage their manipulations; the political use of strategic religious offices was commonplace, we learned. Cases such as these were widely discussed, favorably or unfavorably, depending upon one's social position. ✓

Even if a headman should refuse to appear before the oracle (which one would never do openly), he would blame his poor health or that of close relatives for his absence. But the oracle might still get at him. An example is the case of Somo, a man from a nearby Tapanahoni village.

Are Witches Involved?

Somo was afraid that witches had caused his child's illness. For his own reasons, Somo's Kabiten pretended not to be in a position to escort him to the oracle, so another elder acted as his spokesman. ?

The oracle's speaker urged Somo to step forward, take a stool, and sit himself before the tabernacle. Somo's elder repeated the diagnosis given in his village, but the reaction by Gaan Tata's priests was far from encouraging. The bearers of the tabernacle, who had been standing motionless, started waving the bundle furiously to and fro while Somo's spokesman was still presenting the village's diagnosis. Then they ran behind some nearby houses, with a small group of priests in hot pursuit. When these returned, they told the speaker that Gaan Tata was incensed. Six months earlier, when the child's illness had first manifested itself, he had warned Somo's Captain in no uncertain terms that its illness was not caused by a witch but by a kunu, a "family spirit," displeased with Somo's matrilineal relatives. (Rejecting any verdict of witchcraft for living persons is standard practice at the oracle; it minimizes risk to Gaan Tata's priests from the affronted, thereby avoiding bloodshed as well as interference by the colonial government.) The speaker pointed out that since the Captain had chosen to disregard the advice of the highest spiritual authority in the land, Gaan Tata now refused all further cooperation.

This evoked the standard reaction. The neutrals begged Gaan Tata's forgiveness: he is, of course, absolutely right, but he knows how weak humans are—constantly forgetting good advice, but always pricking up their ears at every bit of juicy village gossip. After several such obsequious entreaties, the deity finally consented to forgive the Captain and his village. But the Captain was ordered to appear before the oracle within a week to pay a heavy fine and then to give a feast of atonement for the neglected kunu. The demonstrations of gratitude from the neutrals and from Somo and his relatives were loud and persistent.

A Fury Neglected

Another headman from a different village escorts a patient to the oracle and asks the oracle to help him understand the causes of the patient's illness. This signals a disagreement between the patient and her family on the one hand and the Captain and other village elders on the other. The patient's case must have been discussed at great length in village palavers before the trip to Gaan Tata's oracle was made. Once the journey was decided upon, it was clear to all parties involved that a political stalemate at the village level blocked any decision on diagnosis and treatment of the patient. To defer judgment to the higher authority of Gaan Tata is a risky procedure. The oracle may uphold the verdict of the patient's Captain, and then she will be reprimanded and fined in public. Or, as happened in the previous case discussed above, the Captain could be upbraided for irresponsible behavior. Such a public rebuke means loss of prestige for the Captain. The case will be discussed throughout the Tapanahoni region. In this specific case, the priests scold the Captain for not paying attention to the kunu of the patient's matrilineage.

A Demon Exorcized

A Captain from the village of Malobi had obtained the priests' permission to bring a sick woman from his village before the oracle. The patient was seated in the middle of the square, right in front of the bearers with the sacred bundle. The speaker asked the Captain to present her case. The Captain stated that he was completely in the dark about the cause of her illness. He had first taken the woman to Malobi's own village oracle, where he was told that an avenging spirit was responsible for her afflictions. Rites of atonement had been performed for the fury, but to no avail. "Now we have nowhere to run to but to the Great Doctor," meaning Gaan Tata. "Could it really be that a demon (bakuu) has taken possession of her? We are at loss for an explanation, but what we do know is that many years ago a mother's brother of our patient stole some food and equipment from his employer, a French Creole: The mother's brother's boat capsized in the rapids of the Lawa River. Later, but without telling his employer, the patient's mother's brother returned to the spot where the accident took place and managed to recover some of the cargo, which he did not return to his employer. The Creole got wind of this, and in revenge sent a bakuu to torment him. This Ndyuka man is now dead, killed by the demon." The Captain stopped there, after reminding the gathering of his own village oracle's verdict, and wondering aloud whether that oracle had perhaps been right after all, had the kunu again invaded a member of the lineage? *kunu*

What the Captain was doing here was inviting Gaan Tata's priests to overturn the verdict of Malobi's village oracle. Why, is difficult to ascertain: there could have been personal animosity between him and its custodians, or he might simply have been trying to avoid the considerable costs of appeasing the kunu, a burden to be shared by all members of his matrilineage and its affinal relatives.

After consulting Gaan Tata, the priests informed the Captain that Malobi's oracle had got it all wrong. It was as the Captain supposed—a demon threatened this woman's life, and her matrilineal kinfolk—but if the people of Malobi really were anxious for the situation to improve, they should get rid of the demon immediately.

The oracle's last words still hung in the air when the patient jumped from her seat uttering raucous, unintelligible cries. Some of the elders present nudged each other: "There you are, Gaan Tata knows best after all. That bakuu knows it has been found out; it realizes it will lose both its human vessel and its future victims." A few days later, in a separate ritual, the priests exorcized the demon.

The majority of bakuu were thought to have been bought from rich shopkeepers and merchants by kinsmen of the possessed. Hundreds of demon mediums began presenting themselves. Opposition to this form of possession crumbled. However, Gaan Tata's priests, and most sha-

mans, staunchly defended the orthodoxy of earlier times, insisting that bakuu were evil spirits, and that the only way to deal with them was with exorcism.

Following is a final and more dramatic case.

A Murder Relived

From Keementi, a Bilo village, a group of elders journeyed to the oracle at Diitabiki with a number of their female relatives. One of these, Nayu, a woman in her early twenties, was a new spirit medium who had urged her family to escort her to Diitabiki for consultations with Gaan Tata. Shortly after their arrival, Nayu was invited to appear before the oracle. As is customary, the young woman positioned herself on a low stool before the oracle and sat motionless for a few seconds. Then she bent forward while spasms coursed through her body. For ten minutes nothing else occurred: everyone waited patiently to see what would happen next. Suddenly she let out a harsh, grating cry which was heard throughout the quiet village. Obviously, a spirit had manifested itself. Curious villagers, eager to witness the spectacle, hurried toward the temple square. There, in a clear and dramatic voice, the medium narrated the story of a murder that had taken place a generation earlier. Through Nayu's mouth spoke the ghost of a woman from the village of Tabiki, an hour's paddling from Keementi village. Her story, which commenced with "My God, what has happened to me, to me, Weti Alesi," was about a murder at the hands of Nayu's elder female relatives, some twenty years earlier.

During the reign of Paramount Chief Amatodya (1937–1947), a man called Sandoli had been married to one Maiki from Keementi, Nayu's mother. Later, Sandoli also married a second woman, Weti Alesi. From the beginning the relationship between the cowives was strained, but it became explosive when Weti Alesi made it public that she was carrying Sandoli's child. One day, while Weti Alesi was washing dishes in the river at one of Keementi's more remote boat landings, Maiki walked up to her, spoiling for a fight. Maiki accused her cowife of trying to make her lose her husband's favor. Soon the two women came to blows. Maiki, aided by her mother and her mother's sister, pulled Weti Alesi to the ground. Then the three women repeatedly kicked her in the belly. Weti Alesi miscarried on the spot, and died. Nayu, or rather Weti Alesi's ghost, related this drama in short sentences interspersed with moaning. Here follows an excerpt of the transcript we managed to write down during and shortly after the session:

How in the world is it possible . . . [moaning] how can they call themselves human beings . . . they trampled on my belly . . . first one, then the other . . . they kicked me until the red liquid came . . . my *pangi* [wrap-around skirt, a female's principal garment] was soaked with the red liquid . . . the red liquid . . . I

defended myself . . . I fought to get free . . . I fought as only a woman from Tabiki can fight. But they kept after me.

The story impressed all those present. In our field notes for that day we stressed the medium's grating cries, the eerie silence that followed the ghost's declaration, the gloom cast over the assembly. We felt we had witnessed a replay of the original tragedy. Soon after the medium's revelations the High Priest ended the session. The elders left without their usual cheerful conversations and joking.

A week later a second, much shorter, oracular session was devoted to Weti Alesi's case; its purpose was to confront the accused with the spirit of the murdered woman.

The medium (Nayu) was positioned in front of the accused, Nayu's own mother and her mother's sister, and Weti Alesi's ghost was invoked again. After the medium repeated her accusation, the priests asked the two sisters whether the ghost had been speaking the truth. After some initial hesitation, these women confirmed that everything had occurred exactly as the ghost reported.

As soon as Nayu came out of her trance the women from her matrilineage fastened two stoles around her shoulder—a mark of prestige and social approval—used on festive or solemn occasions. (When asked why they gave stoles as presents after a séance, Ndyuka usually responded that they do so to honor the ghost. In reality, much depends on whether or not the performance was considered sufficiently impressive.) Many others embraced the medium and complimented her presentation. Young Nayu had definitely improved her social status: the medium for an avenging spirit must be consulted on all matters of import. She would henceforth be counted among the influential members of her lineage.

But if there are obvious rewards for being a medium authenticated by Gaan Tata, there are also serious hazards. Any young woman who accuses her next-of-kin runs the risk of losing the support of all her family. Nayu had publicly charged her closest female relatives—the only people she could turn to when she needed help weeding her gardens—with murder. In times of religious or matrimonial crisis, her matrilineage would be expected to support her. If she were involved in a brawl, that same group of women would have to help her fight her rivals or enemies. But if her family turned against her, she would stand alone. Typically, therefore, any woman who dares accuse her closest relatives risks a great deal with little chance of gain. And if her mediumship had not been accepted as genuine, an even more hazardous situation would have developed. Nayu would then have lived in permanent disgrace as someone who had falsely dishonored her own. That she had been fully aware of these risks is evidenced by the strategic manner in which this young woman prepared for the disclosures.

The first signs of possession appeared in 1960, at least a year before Naya consulted Gaan Tata. Naya was living in her father's lumber camp in the coastal region, far from her native village of Keementi and her matrilineal relatives, when the avenging spirit forced both father and daughter to relive haunting memories. The onset of possession by Weti Alesi's ghost undermined Naya's health. Her father, understanding the risks in this type of spirit seizure, took it upon himself to accompany his daughter to the elders of her matrilineage. Her bee (belly, matrilineal kin) bore full responsibility, he argued, so its elders must appease the ghost. At first Naya's relatives ignored the kunu's message. They insinuated that it was really a bakuu, sent by a witch, that had invaded Naya. Knowing that any demon that manifests itself before Gaan Tata's oracle would immediately be exorcised by his priests, they encouraged Naya to seek the verdict of the Diitabiki oracle. However, as we have seen, events took a different turn than they intended.

A great deal of political maneuvering preceded the oracular session. Weti Alesi had been murdered in the early 1940s, two decades before the oracular session we witnessed. At that time it had triggered the customary *boto feti* (lit. "boat fight"), a massive retaliatory action in which both men and women from the village of Tabiki took to their boats, paddled to Keementi, and beat up any relatives of Maiki, Naya's mother, who were still around. Maiki herself had fled her village in time. In Keementi itself, some houses were destroyed and some fruit trees chopped down. The elders of both villages were then summoned before Gaanman Amatodya at Diitabiki. But it proved impossible to arrive at the truth because "testimony was contradictory." It may be relevant here that Amatodya, although Paramount Chief, was never a High Priest of Gaan Tata's oracle. In any case, Maiki and her relatives were acquitted.

In 1961, six months before Naya appeared before Gaan Tata, trouble flared up again because of her first revelations. The headmen of the two villages involved conducted a lively but unproductive meeting. The Keementi elders dismissed the medium's utterances as childish prattle and walked out of the palaver, exchanging recriminations with their counterparts from Tabiki. An elder from another village, who happened to be present at that palaver, secretly informed Akontu, who immediately summoned both parties to appear before the oracle at Diitabiki. The elders of both villages obeyed the High Priest's orders to appear before the oracle. They journeyed to Diitabiki where the Keementi were ordered to organize, at their own considerable expense, a feast of atonement for Weti Alesi's ghost. They accepted the responsibility and were now willing to foot the bill. Once the story broke, they had given up all resistance and from then on were passive participants in the drama.

It therefore appears that the case had been settled well in advance of the oracular session. Even before Naya's possessing spirit was given

a chance to make her accusations public, her complaint had already been heard in the Chief's house, behind closed doors. Guilt had been determined and punishment meted out in a secret palaver. The mother and her sister were sentenced to two years of "hard labor," meaning that they were expected to remain in Akontu's village to perform chores for him.²

CATHARSIS

During our first months at the oracle, we often felt that we understood but a small portion of what was happening. The politics of a case were usually the easy part. The Gaanman, supported by "his" oracle, demonstrated that he could compel the elders of any village to obey him. In such a relatively egalitarian society, compliance with the Gaanman's wishes was only achieved after crafty maneuvering by the priests and their secular accomplices. A Chief who was not also the oracle's High Priest would find it much more difficult to reach his goals. The present Gaanman was appointed to his high office in 1966, but never succeeded in attaining the status of High Priest as well.

The confrontation between the oracle and Weti Alesi's ghost has more subtle implications. By staging this drama, the oracle's staff evoked and channeled emotions that are by their nature both positive and negative. Emotional ambivalence is a universal phenomenon. The priests and their audience, like everyone else, understood the difference between obligatory and genuine affection, as well as concealed and open hostility. In this particular case, ambivalence was further compounded by polygyny, an institution that denies legitimate expression to certain powerful interests and emotions. In Ndyuka culture, a polygynous marriage is inaugurated with a ritual to ensure congenial cooperation (cf. van Wetering 1966). Thereafter, cowives are expected to live and work together in harmony. When quarrels erupt nevertheless, relatives and neighbors rush to the scene to put an immediate end to the squabble, reminding the cowives that they should live together without animosity.

When Weti Alesi mentioned her pregnancy, it elicited strong emotional reactions in the audience. People understood the ambivalence and rivalry that plagued the participants in the drama, and they empathized. Those who had known about the murder and its immediate aftermath were shaken. But even those who heard about it then for the first time left the meeting in a somber mood. We venture that an institutionalized form of catharsis was activated here. The oracular session served as a stage for resolving old animosities. By compelling the murderers and their kin to accept collective responsibility, the oracle's priests channeled privately felt emotions into a social device for settling discourse between two families: a new cult centering on Weti

Alesi's ghost, with Nayu as its medium. Central to such an avenging spirit cult is the notion that the sins of matrilineal kinfolk, living or dead, fall on all their descendants. Whether the transgressions were actual crimes, honest mistakes, or sins of negligence matters little: the matrilineage shoulders the burdens of its members' errors indefinitely, and under the kunu's policing powers, the antagonism between two lineages is kept from festering into a societal menace.

Nayu's "discovery" of Weti Alesi's murder is also intriguing. When the homicide took place, Nayu had not yet been born. Although the crime had remained unresolved for more than twenty years, she must have heard enough bits and pieces of the story to enable her, without any overt aid except her father's recollections, to reconstruct the scene. Later, when we had an opportunity to discuss the case with elders of the two villages involved, they concurred that the ghost's account was accurate down to the last sordid detail. That leaves the question of why Nayu took the risks she did. Was this young woman sufficiently savvy that she could plan a campaign that would lead her to high social status and influence? It is possible; Maroon history records many audacious social climbers. The Ndyuka themselves believe that Nayu had very little to do with her success, that it was Weti Alesi who made her important.

In staging the possession of Nayu by Weti Alesi's ghost, Gaan Tata's priests improved the social cohesion of people in at least two Ndyuka villages. In this case, the priests increased neither their income nor their power by transforming personal turmoil and inter-family strife into social drama. This was thus an example of how Gaan Tata's priesthood could improve the quality of life in Tapanahoni villages in the 1960s and '70s. But such occasional services to the community could not redeem the institution's parasitism on the Ndyuka people, or legitimate its general corruption. Even at the time, Gaan Tata's self-serving and manipulative control was often intimated in private, and gradually, with increasing vehemence, in public.

Notes

¹ Bonno Thoden was sitting in the second row within the temple, behind the High Priest. Ineke van Wetering sat some 15 meters away, in the group of female spectators.

² Later, in the month after these events, we often met the two convicted women in Diitabiki. They were treated by the Gaanman as dependent kin. Every morning they would appear before the Chief's house to be informed about the work they had to do that day. Soon, as so often happens with convicted persons, the Gaanman and his family accepted them as valued assistants. We have no evidence that they were badly treated while serving their sentence.

A Witch Called Coba

In the preceding chapter we discussed Gaan Tata's oracle as if it were an institution that had been in force since times immemorial. Yet, although some of its elements undoubtedly are ancient, much that looks primordial today actually evolved during the late 1880s and early 1890s, those decades of rapid change when the Ndyuka quit the lumbering trade to become the dominant river transporters of French Guiana and Suriname. While this chapter discusses some of the ancient roots of Gaan Tata's religious regime, most attention will be given to these not so ancient formative years.

ORIGINS OF THE GAAN TATA CULT

In oral history accounts Gaan Gadu or Gaan Tata is always referred to as Sweli Gadu (The God of the Oath). Only later, in the nineteenth century, did the names Gaan Gadu and Gaan Tata¹ come into general use. Most knowledge about Gaan Gadu/Gaan Tata/Sweli Gadu derives from two central myths:

Sweli Gadu's Voyage

Sweli Gadu helped our ancestors in Afikaan Kondee (Africa). One day a number of Africans were invited to a white man's ship. There was plenty of food and drink aboard; our African ancestors loved it. While the party was going on, the ship took to the ocean. Our ancestors did not even notice. This white captain was very clever. While they were having a good time he gave them "bad" things to drink, so that they would fall asleep. The next day, when they felt the big waves of the ocean, they realized that they had been kidnapped. Great was their consternation, but there was nothing they

could do about it. It was too late to swim back. Fortunately, one of them had brought the Sweli Gadu obiya with him.²

Sweli Gadu's Anger

While we were toiling on the plantations, Sweli Gadu kept us company. We dug trenches, sometimes even deep canals where fishing boats could moor. Friend, the work was too much; it killed us! A number of us decided to escape. We swore a holy oath: "In the name of Masaa Gadu I will *lowee* [run away]." Thereupon each of us made a small incision in his arm, to let a few drops fall into a sacred potion. Then we all drank that, thereby exchanging our blood while swearing "Where you die, I will die." Sweli Gadu, seeing how miserable we were, came to our rescue. He accompanied us on our flight, and showed us in what direction we had to cut our path. This obiya, this Sweli Gadu, was enraged by the treatment his Africans had to endure. The obiya helped us to beat the whites. That is why we could kill so many whites.³

SWELI GADU, THE ANCIENT NDYUKA DEITY

In the first decades after the tribe gained its legal independence, all Ndyuka were summoned every three or four years to Gadu Tabiki, a ritual center on an island in the Tapanahoni. There they renewed the Covenant by swearing fidelity to their God, to their Gaanman, and to their fellow Ndyuka. They swore never to betray their relatives and countrymen to the whites, and never to harm them by practicing witchcraft. Only by participating in this ritual could one become a member of the national community. Allegiance was sworn to the Ndyuka nation and to one's fellows. During the nineteenth century, a system of delegated responsibility replaced communal oath taking; a few elders from each descent line would take the oath for all their fellow clan members. From about 1890 until 1972 all Ndyuka adults were expected to travel to Diitabiki once every three or four years to renew their oath: they would dip their fingers in a potion and suck their fingers to ingest the liquid.

A second important aspect of the Sweli Gadu cult was its poison ordeal. People suspected of witchcraft would be summoned to appear before the custodians of the Sweli Gadu shrines. After being informed of the suspicions of their relatives, the suspects would be ordered to utter an oath and then ingest a few drops of a sacred potion by putting their finger in it and licking it, saying: "May Sweli kill me if I ever commit witchcraft."⁴ During the nineteenth century, and in sharp contrast to modern times, witchcraft cases were so rare that some of them are still vividly remembered today.

Before about 1880, people suspected of witchcraft would be forced to undergo the poison ordeal in the ancient capital Puketi. Once the

poison was ingested, the suspect had to remain in custody for about a week so that the custodians of the ordeal could watch for any signs of illness. If that became apparent, witchcraft had been proven. The prisoner would then be handed over to the families of those who had complained to the priests. After being tortured by these families for hours or even days, the witch would be burned at the stake. We know of only three well-documented cases of persons who were brought before the poison ordeal in that period. All were men who possessed exceptional qualities. Two were burned at the stake, the third, the shaman Dikii (see chapter 9), had to be set free.

The Aluku, the Ndyuka's neighbors to the east, have a similar conception of their links with the highest supernatural authorities. Bilby (1997:674), after first discussing comparable practices among the Ashanti, has this to say on Aluku oath taking:

Finally, we return to what the Ashanti call "drinking the gods," The Aluku equivalent is known as *diingi sweli* [literally "drinking the oath"]. In the Aluku case, the god to whom this oath is normally drunk is Tata Odun, the most important and [after the Supreme Creator, Masa Gadu] the most powerful spiritual being recognized by the Aluku. Tata Odun is said to have come over from Africa along with the ancestors and to have led them safely through the forest to their present location. Today he remains the overarching tribal deity of the Aluku, as he watches over the entire nation and enforces a strict code or morality that must be obeyed by all who reside within Aluku territory. So closely is Tata Odun associated with the oaths drunk to him that he is also known as the Sweli Gadu [the "swearing god"].

MESSAGES FROM THE TAPANAHONI

Dearly beloved pastor, you are as a great lord who has been put in charge of us. Please do everything in your power; speak to the governor about having a religious chief appointed in Maripaston who can help banish *grantata* [Gaan Tata] worship from our district altogether. The captains of the Matuari [Matawai] all fear the *grantata*; they can do nothing against it. This I can assert even in their presence. (King 1973:49 [orig. 1894])⁵

In the early 1890s, the Maroons of northern Suriname became restive. From the Ndyuka heartland along the far-away Tapanahoni, word had reached them of the appearance of a powerful and punitive god called Gaan Gadu or Gaan Tata.⁶ This deity, they were told, planned to wage unrelenting war on witches. The corpses of such nefarious persons were to be dumped into the undergrowth along certain creeks where carrion birds would pick out their eyes and caimans tear out their bowels. All possessions of those who, upon their deaths, were

found to be witches were confiscated by Gaan Tata's priests and carried to Saantigoon on the Tapanahoni, the deity's most sacred forest shrine.

In 1891 the first reports arrived, almost simultaneously, from two different places. Carpenters building a mission post on the Cottica River reported that there had been a gathering of hundreds of Ndyuka in the nearby village of Walimbomofu (near present-day Agiti Ondoo, see fig. 7) where emissaries from the Tapanahoni had disclosed Gaan Tata's new commandments. These instructions concerned many spheres of life, from religious worship to marital relations (BHW 1892:142). At Kofi Kampu, a small Ndyuka community near the confluence of Sara Creek and Suriname River, a missionary heard similar news (BHW 1892:139–41). Here, the messengers from the Tapanahoni demanded that the Ndyuka of the Sara Creek region destroy their existing cult shrines: all places of worship should hereafter be dedicated to Gaan Tata alone. The old obiya were to be thrown into the river or burned. In 1891, similar instructions arrived at the Saamaka village of Sofibuka, in the middle section of the Suriname River (Albitrouw 1979:29–30).

Turmoil followed. From eye-witness accounts it is known that hundreds of Ndyuka, and many Saamaka and Matawai as well, partook in great religious feasts that lasted several weeks. In Maroon societies, such celebrations herald the coming of a new movement or a new religious leader. In this case it was the Gaan Tata movement, and it was gaining converts. By 1893 it had established itself as the most powerful cult in Ndyuka communities of the coastal plain. Soon it made inroads into the territory of other groups as well. A few years before the turn of the century, the new ritual centers on the Tapanahoni drew scores of believers from Saamaka villages (Spalburg 1979:34). In 1893, Gaan Tata's priests made converts among the Matawai—no small accomplishment because only a few decades earlier theirs had been the first tribe to embrace Christianity. In 1895, even the tiny Kwinti tribe on their remote Coppename River came under the spell of Gaan Tata (Kraag 1980:44).

From the beginning, the village of Santigron (see fig. 7) with its mixed population of Ndyuka, Saamaka, and Matawai was a stronghold of Gaan Tata worship. It was from here that his emissaries traveled south to Matawai villages in 1892 and 1893. Its location, less than 30 kilometers from Paramaribo, Suriname's capital, made Santigron a place of pilgrimage for many city Creoles who had heard about the god's reputation (King 1973:40). Christian missions organized special expeditions to preach against the "false god," trying to undo the impact of Gaan Tata's message on their Matawai following (BHW 1895:12–42). Despite these efforts to eradicate the cult from what they considered a Christian preserve, the missionaries were only partly successful; a quarter century later Gaan Tata was still worshipped in secret in several Matawai villages.⁷

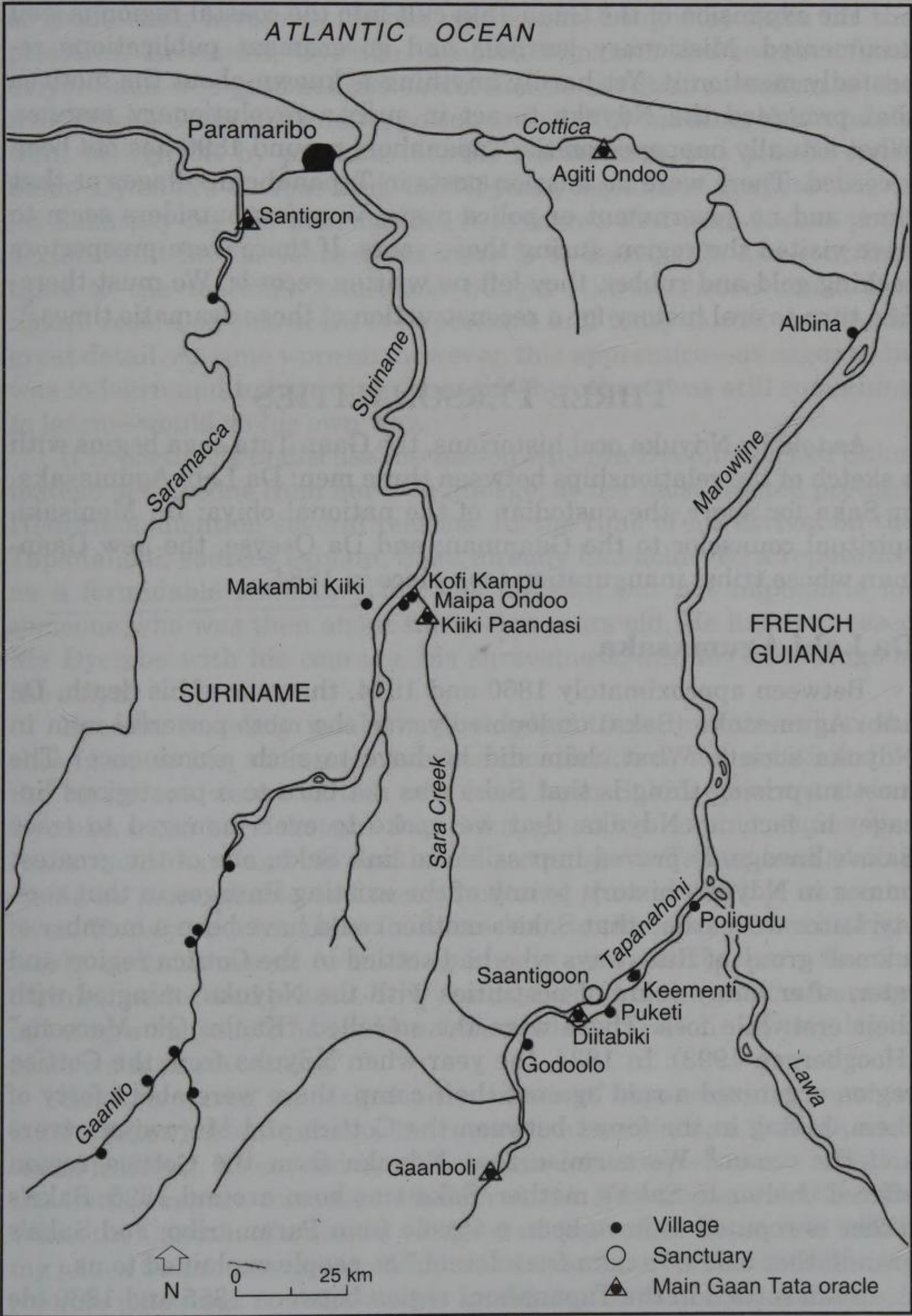


Figure 7 Expansion of the Gaan Tata cult, ca. 1900.

The expansion of the Gaan Tata cult into the coastal region is well documented. Missionary journals and government publications repeatedly mention it. Yet hardly anything is known about the motives that prompted the Ndyuka to act in such a revolutionary manner. What actually happened on the Tapanahoni around 1890 has not been recorded. There were no mission posts in Tapanahoni villages at that time, and no government or police posts. Very few outsiders seem to have visited the region during those years. If there were prospectors seeking gold and rubber, they left no written records. We must therefore turn to oral history for a reconstruction of these dramatic times.⁸

THREE PERSONALITIES

As told by Ndyuka oral historians, the Gaan Tata saga begins with a sketch of the relationships between three men: Da Labi Agumasaka, or Saka for short, the custodian of the national obiya; Da Menisaki, spiritual counselor to the Gaanman; and Da Oseyse, the new Gaanman whose tribal inauguration took place in 1884.

Da Labi Agumasaka

Between approximately 1860 and 1914, the year of his death, Da Labi Agumasaka (Saka) undoubtedly was the most powerful man in Ndyuka society. What claim did he have to such prominence? The most surprising thing is that Saka was not born to a prestigious lineage; in fact, no Ndyuka that we spoke to ever managed to trace Saka's lineage. It proved impossible to link Saka, one of the greatest names in Ndyuka history, to any of the existing lineages in that society. Later we learned that Saka's mother could have been a member of a small group of Runaways who had settled in the Cottica region and later, after many years of hostilities with the Ndyuka, mingled with their erstwhile foes. These were the so-called "Kaabu Olo Maroons" (Hoogbergen 1993). In 1834, the year when Ndyuka from the Cottica region organized a raid against their camp, there were about forty of them, hiding in the forest between the Cottica and Marowijne rivers and the ocean.⁹ We surmise that Ndyuka from the Cottica region offered shelter to Saka's mother. Saka was born around 1825. Saka's father is reputed to have been a Creole from Paramaribo; and Saka's grandfather a Jew, "a man from Israel," as people explained to us.

Saka settled in the Tapanahoni region between 1855 and 1860 (de Goeje 1908:66). He was invited to come to the Tapanahoni by the foremost Ndyuka priestess of the nineteenth century, Ma Dyemba. Saka behaved in every respect like an adopted son. He had been working in the Cottica as a lumberman before, and he continued to return to the region for more stints of lumber work. With the proceeds, he took care of all of Ma Dyemba's material needs; our sources volunteer a long list

of goods (salt, kerosene, clothes, and sugar) bought by Saka for the priestess. In return, Dyemba initiated him into the secrets of the obiya. Saka was groomed for succession as the first custodian of the tribal Sweli Gadu cult and its poison ordeal. The teaching deliberately went slowly: bit by precious bit, the information was passed on to Saka. Dyemba's obvious and, for Ndyuka, legitimate purpose was to let Saka pay for the information. It is feared that once such a pupil decides that he has learned all there is to learn, gifts and contributions to the teacher's household budget will be discontinued. But Saka's record on this score is impeccable and today is still recalled in great detail. As time wore on, however, this apprentice—as eager as he was to learn and to ingratiate himself when there was still something to learn—would go his own way.

It is pertinent to discuss the reason why Ma Dyemba picked Saka, instead of someone from her own lineage, as her most trusted protégé. Historians mention several reasons. At the time of his arrival on the Tapanahoni, sources explain, Saka already had achieved a reputation as a formidable shaman. This was unusual but not impossible for someone who was then about thirty-five years old. He had impressed Ma Dyemba with his courage, his shrewdness, and his knowledge of the obiya.

Dyemba certainly would have weighed these qualities when she chose him as her successor. Another consideration, not mentioned by the historians we consulted, may have been Saka's insecure status. Dyemba could have thought that Saka, given his humble origins as a "backwoods man" and his position as a stranger to Tapanahoni society, would be more pliable and accommodating than any of her own relatives. To rely on a kinsman for succession to the office of Sweli priest would be tantamount to inviting him to oust his teacher after the training period had passed. To Dyemba, Saka had the great advantage of being a "nobody"; he could not base his aspirations on any legitimate claim to succession.

Saka, however, embarked on a career of expansion; he began to build a following and enhance his reputation as a shaman through additional learning. He enticed a number of his relatives, who still resided in the Cottica region, to settle with him at the Ndyuka capital Diitabiki. When the Captain of a nearby village died, part of the deceased's following joined Saka's new group. Within a decade Saka had secured his own reliable following. To enhance his knowledge of the obiya, Saka made three trips to the Saamaka Maroons on the Suriname River, the classic "grand tour" of a Ndyuka shaman. Such trips were costly and took many months to complete. After these Saamaka trips, Saka's position in Ndyuka society was secure. He had a following of his own; in fact, he was the headman of the most populous quarter of Diitabiki. Saka ruled the Ndyuka with a firm hand. Some even claimed that he hanged peo-

ple who violated his rules. All Ndyuka historians stated that he could be tough, not given to leniency. It seemed there was no one in the whole of Ndyuka who could stand up to Saka and challenge him. But one man, Da Menisaki, nonetheless attempted to do just that.

Da Menisaki

Menisaki or Kooso achieved great fame as a shaman in about the same period that Saka built his position. In contrast to Saka, Menisaki made his "grand tour" to the Aluku in the east, where he bought Kumanti obiya. During the 1880s, Menisaki acted as a king-maker, pushing the candidacy of Oseyse (term of office 1888–1915; Oseyse had been inaugurated by the Ndyuka in 1884, and installed by the colonial government in 1888). Menisaki, who was from the village of Benanu in the Bilo section of the river, used the Poligudu people (the descendants of the Black Rangers who deserted the colonial army in 1807) as his servants. He demanded tribute from them in the form of part of the produce of their gardens (swidden plots) and ordered them to perform odd chores for him, to build houses or make canoes.

The First Priest of the Gaan Tata oracle explained Menisaki's position in Ndyuka society in the following way.¹⁰

Menisaki, that was a man in a quite different league from the shamans of today. From Poligudu to Godoolo—at that time the first and the last of Ndyuka villages on the Tapanahoni—no one could stand up to him. He knew everything; when making a libation he would pray to all our ancestors, naming them from the beginning of our society to the present day. No decision could be taken without him. Menisaki inspired great fear among the people of Poligudu. If the Poligudu people were disobedient or aroused Menisaki's displeasure in any way, his assistants would go into their gardens and destroy their crops. The Poligudu people had nowhere to run. But when Gaanman Oseyse came to know about this intimidation and brutality, he ordered Menisaki to stop pestering his people at once: "They are my sentries," he said, "and you should let them live in peace." ["Sentries," because Poligudu is the first village close to the confluence of Lawa and Tapanahoni].

Menisaki died around 1900.

Da Oseyse

When Gaanman Aban died in 1882, Oseyse from the small Otoo clan (the clan from whose members the Gaanman is selected) was working as a lumberjack in the Cottica region. In a divination ritual, the ghost of Aban had pointed to Oseyse as his successor. A delegation of elders was dispatched to the Cottica region to inform Oseyse of Aban's last wish. Oseyse, however, knowing the political map of Tapanahoni society as well as anybody else, and fearing to play second

fiddle to Saka, politely refused the honor. A second delegation was sent, headed by his spiritual counselor¹¹ Menisaki. Again Oseyse refused. It was only when Saka appeared in his forest camp, as the head of the third delegation, that Oseyse accepted the office of Gaanman. Saka and Oseyse traveled to Paramaribo to do their shopping and then returned together to the Tapanahoni. Oseyse was sworn in as the new Paramount Chief by the colonial authorities in 1888.

A SHAMAN SPURNED

Saka preferred to remain the power behind the throne when Oseyse was selected by Ndyuka elders as their new Gaanman. A few months before Oseyse's Ndyuka inauguration in 1884, Saka journeyed to the Saamaka of the Suriname River to visit with his colleagues, shamans who could prepare obiya that would shield Oseyse from his adversaries' jealousy. Saka's manifest purpose was to assist the new Gaanman, to prepare him ritually with the best of medicines available. Saka convinced the Gaanman-designate that although he, Saka, was the only one who could do this, even he needed to purchase some additional obiya from his Saamaka friends in the west. This was his third trip to the Saamaka. Had his mission been successful, Saka



Figure 8 *Gran-Man des Yucas et sa cour* (Ndyuka Gaanman and his court). This drawing from 1886 shows Oseyse wearing a top hat, his counselors (who are men, not women), and Saka, the man in the middle looking at us. (Source: Brunetti, 1890)

would have replaced Menisaki as Oseyse's spiritual counselor. Unfortunately for Saka, while he was gone, the gaan kuutu, the great or national council, convened to install Oseyse as their Paramount Chief, without any intention of waiting for Saka's return. At the prompting of these elders, Oseyse's inauguration was held at Puketi while Saka was still on the Suriname River. A historian among Saka's descendants made the following statement:¹²

While father Saka was approaching the confluence of the Jai Creek and the Tapanahoni, he heard guns being fired. He immediately understood what that meant: behind his back, Oseyse was being installed as the new Gaanman. Father Saka painted one side of his face red and the other black [probably a dramatic gesture to demonstrate the intensity of his feelings]. Father Saka was never to forget or forgive this slight, and one day Oseyse would pay dearly for it. Here he was, returning with powerful obiya bought with his own money, but these obiya went unappreciated and people appeared to distrust him. Jubilantly they surrounded their new leader. It was as if Saka did not exist anymore!

✓ Apparently Saka soon regained his position of influence at Diitabiki, steering the national cults while using Oseyse as his front man. Brunetti, a Catholic missionary, and one of the few Bakaa who visited the Tapanahoni in those years, understood the relationship between the two men. After that visit in 1886, he described Saka as "an intelligent and crafty man"; he also mentioned Saka's influence over the Paramount Chief (Brunetti 1890:235–9). These observations correspond with the accounts presented by van Lier (1919) and Morssink (1932–1935) about the early years of Oseyse's chieftainship; the sources agree that Saka was then the most powerful man on the Tapanahoni.

MENISAKI WARNS THE NATION

A few years after Oseyse's inauguration, Menisaki who, in those days, was still Oseyse's spiritual adviser, journeyed to Diitabiki at the head of an important delegation of elders from most of the Bilo (Downstream) villages. Menisaki was considered *primus inter pares* at the gaan kuutu, often acting as its spokesman. The delegation of Bilo notables that arrived at Diitabiki thus had a leader who was listened to at tribal councils.

Upon Menisaki's arrival, a meeting of all Ndyuka headmen and influential elders was convened at Diitabiki. Its purpose was "to listen to Da Menisakis's message," meaning that they were willing to make it the topic of an official palaver. Menisaki insisted that his communication was a matter of great urgency and had to be acted on immediately; he spoke of disaster and impending danger. He characterized his speech with the words "Bilo booko," meaning "The Downstream vil-

lages are disintegrating." In his speech he warned the gaan kuutu that "Witches are about to take over our villages, killing our hard-working people so that they may come into possession of their money. We have no one left to turn to but Sweli Gadu. Gaanman, call upon every Ndyuka, male and female, to take the poison ordeal."

The initial response from Saka and the other custodians of the national shrines, even from Oseyse, was less than lukewarm. They resented Menisaki's initiative as an encroachment upon their authority. For as long as they could recall, Sweli Gadu's custodians had never been compelled, by public opinion or by any particular elder, to subject people to the poison ordeal. That obiya was considered the property of the Otoo, the Gaanman's clan. On the other hand, they realized that Menisaki's reference to the dismal spiritual conditions in the Downstream area also applied to the Opu (Upstream) villages. There was a general feeling in both Bilo and Opu that they faced a serious problem and that only drastic measures could remedy the situation. Traditionally the poison ordeal had been given to perhaps one or a few suspects each year; now Menisaki suggested that everyone should take it.

The outcome of these deliberations is well known: despite a stiff reprimand for his meddling, Menisaki's request was granted. All Ndyuka adults from villages in the Tapanahoni, Cottica, and Sara Creek regions were expected to journey to Diitabiki to drink the sacred potion. No one was forced to go, but to abstain would have meant inviting suspicion. This was the first of the great "oath takings." People hoped that this massive "drinking of the god" (*diingi gadu*), as the oath taking was called, would put a stop to the ever bolder actions of witches. Most Ndyuka believed that if the potion was administered properly, Sweli Gadu would kill the witches but leave the innocent in a stronger position. But soon afterwards, new stories about the horrors committed by these evil creatures, the wisiman, began circulating. Unrest increased, surfacing eventually in the ancient capital of Puketi, the very heart of Ndyuka society. The occasion was the death of a young woman. The interrogation of her ghost triggered off a set of new events with far-reaching consequences.

THE INTERROGATION OF COBA'S GHOST

Sa Coba died in her village of Puketi in 1889 or 1890. Apart from the datum that she had never given birth, historians volunteer little information about her. As happened to every adult who died, Coba's ghost had to be subjected to an interrogation to learn the causes of her death and to elicit information on potential sources of supernatural danger threatening the living. The origin of this inquest lies in the ancient West and Central African tradition of "carrying the corpse,"¹³ a ritual maintained by Suriname's Maroons.

Key to the idea of any ghost interrogation is the belief that some ethereal essence of the deceased remains on Earth for a while. That spiritual part usually hovers near the corpse, but may wander about during the night. This Yooka (spirit or ghost) may not take leave of humanity to join the company of ancestor spirits until the first of the funerary rites has been properly executed. The goal of corpse divination is to establish the moral stature of the deceased: is he or she a respectable person or perhaps a sinner, or worse, a witch.

A second key idea is that a ghost retains full knowledge of everything the deceased has done during his or her lifetime. Skillful and persistent interrogators can pry out every secret of a Yooka. The ghost also retains some human emotions, such as shame, and preferences for certain persons over others. Naturally, any Yooka will try to hide embarrassing facts from scrutiny. But even in the face of such opposition, competent interrogators are far from powerless. They will invoke the community of ancestor spirits, beseeching them to bring the ghost to a full confession. Should a Yooka prove exceptionally stubborn or devious, the gods themselves may be petitioned to intervene, to issue a binding order to the ghost to disclose whatever the interrogators want to know. In Ndyuka thinking, any ghost is guilty until proven otherwise. Consequently, the atmosphere during an interrogation is far from friendly. Particularly at the beginning of the inquest, the tone and phrasing of the questions tend to be hostile. The interrogators are quick to ridicule or reprimand the spirit for any evasive answer, for any attempt to conceal the truth. When something unsavory surfaces, they freely make derogatory comments.

A corpse is prepared for the inquest by wrapping it in a shroud and tying it to a makeshift litter that is then placed on the heads of two bearers, usually selected from among the oloman (gravediggers), the main funerary association. The inquest, the interrogation of the Yooka that is, is conducted by carrying the corpse through the village. The ghost communicates by moving the bearers, exactly as Gaan Tata moves his bearers when he feels like reacting to questions or certain events. A forward move signifies an affirmative response, a backward or sideways movement a negative one. Usually the "dialogue" between investigators and ghost is much more complex than simply "yes" or "no." Once the interrogation is well under way, even minor motions may mean something in the broader context. Wild and chaotic movements of the bier reveal the ghost's discomfort or embarrassment at a particular line of questioning.

In addition to passing interrogation, the ghost has to succeed in certain physical tests before it may qualify as an upstanding Yooka. Usually its first assignment is to find the persons that the ritual's managers have instructed to hide in some abandoned house in another part of the village. The deceased's ghost has to demonstrate the omniscience expected of any decent Yooka by showing it knows how to find

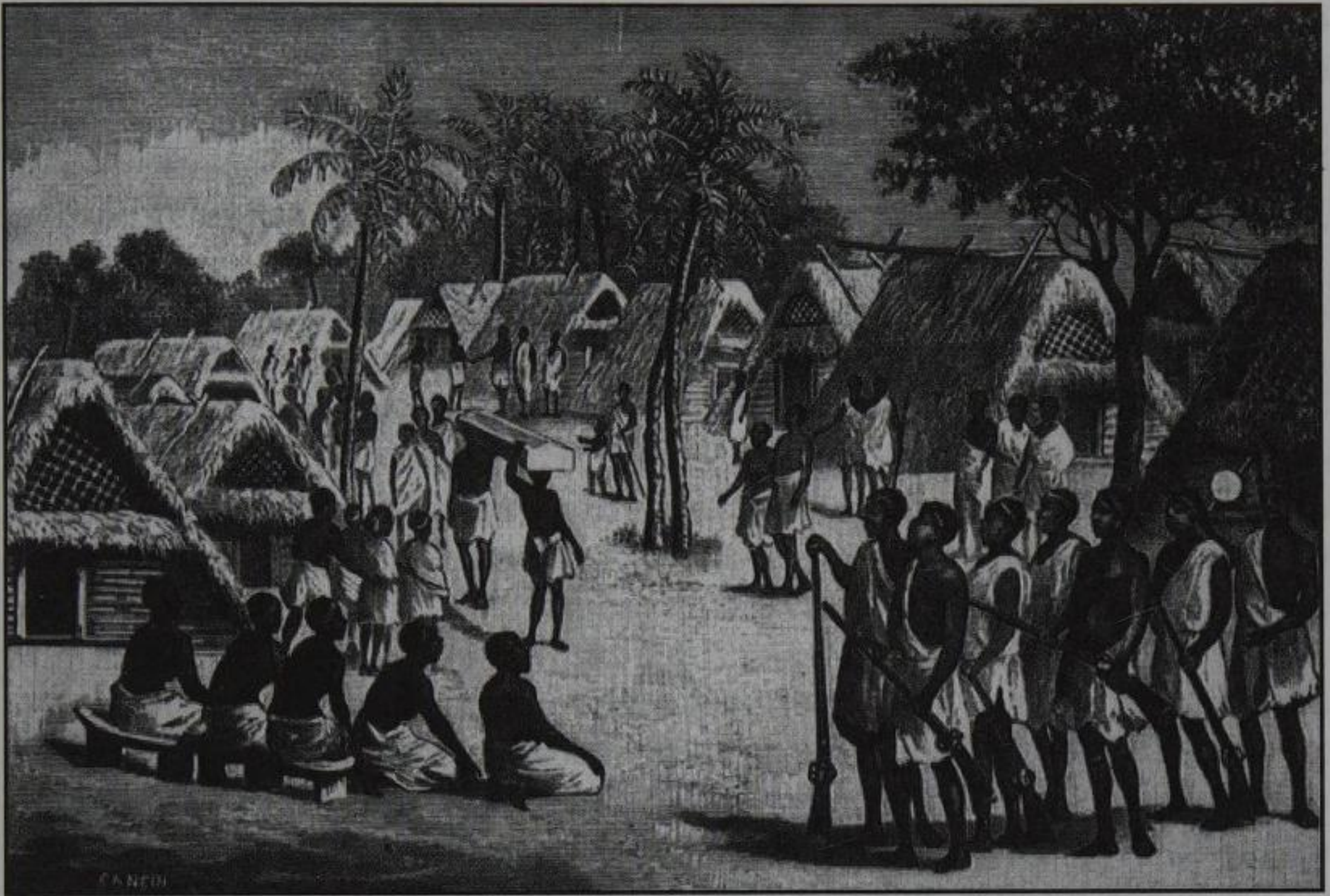


Figure 9 Corpse divination in a Ndyuka village. The coffin is carried by gravediggers, which is representative of a respectable death. (Source: Brunetti, 1890)

these people. It must force its bearers to take the most direct route to the place where the people are hiding. This is considered the first test of a deceased's moral character; the Yooka of evil persons are believed to have lost the capacity for finding missing persons.

The chief purpose of an inquest is to discover the supernatural cause of death. Ndyuka recognize two main categories: *gadu dede* (killed by god) and *Yooka dede* (killed by a ghost, which amounts to a respectable death). The *gadu dede* category is subdivided into *wisi dede* (a witch's death) and *misi dede* (a sinner's death). All cases of *gadu dede* are posthumously punished by denying the family the right to bury the corpse properly: sinners are placed in a shallow grave; witches are left in an unholy spot in the forest, covered by at most a few branches. All possessions of sinners and witches are confiscated by Gaan Tata's priests.

At Coba's historic inquest, the very first movement of the bearers indicated that something was wrong. To the traditional opening question "Gaanman is missing some of his subjects, could you help him find these individuals?," Coba's Yooka replied that it deeply regretted not being in a position to comply with the wishes of the Paramount Chief. What the ghost should have done was to steer the bearers to a house where a few villagers, at the request of the interrogators, were hiding. The fact that the ghost failed to do this was interpreted as an

admission by the deceased that she had perpetrated witchcraft or other sins of a grave nature.

Because a verdict of witchcraft is the strongest condemnation possible, and stains the reputation of surviving relatives, a second opinion was called for. Another team of bearers was brought forth to verify the procedure used by the first team. According to oral history accounts, this second team of bearers headed straight for the village's boat landing, with the Yooka almost forcing them into the river. This urgent drive toward the river was interpreted to mean that the deceased was too ashamed to stay in the village for even a single minute. She felt, people reasoned, that she had no right to remain among the upright people she had so persistently sought to injure.

The village council was not immediately informed of this development. Instead, a message was sent from the deceased to the Gaanman at Diitabiki. This *dede mofu* (ghost's communication) followed the standard format: "I can no longer stay among decent human beings; it is best that they take me away." And just as traditional came Chief Oseyse's answer: "Let things happen as the ghost desires. The Yooka must have the last word. We wash our hands of the matter." By the time the messenger had paddled from Puketi to Diitabiki and back again it was late in the afternoon, too late to bring Coba's remains to the creek near Saantigoon where witches' corpses were cast into the undergrowth. It was decided that the corpse could stay one more night at Puketi. There was yet another reason for this delay: the villagers' needed to know whether Coba had hidden any dangerous, witchcraft-tainted objects in their village.

COBA REVEALS A CONSPIRACY

The next morning the interrogation started routinely. Coba's ghost was told to show the places where she had hidden her "weapons," her instruments of witchcraft. The ghost complied; at several places in the village, bottles were dug up and strange objects removed from the palm leaf roofs covering houses. Until 1972, such "cleansings" were routine procedures; we have personally witnessed quite a few. The objects thus recovered were probably nothing but the defensive charms people used to ward off the alleged black magic of some of their neighbors and kinsmen. But shortly before the corpse was finally to be carried away from the village, something quite unexpected happened.

Diitabiki's plaza contains its faakatiki (lit. "flagpole," an ancestor shrine that looks like one) and kee osu (mortuary, lit. "crying house"; a large open, shed where corpses are stored until their interment. Instead of remaining close to this ritual center, the locale where ghost interrogations are usually conducted, the bearers broke through the circle of elders and onlookers, and ran toward the forest. They were stopped at

the village's edge by the gravediggers in charge of the proceedings, who had run after the two bearers under their bouncing plank. When the interrogation was resumed on the spot, Coba's ghost took the initiative. "Why are you in such a hurry to get rid of me?" she chided her investigators. "Don't you want to hear more about what is going on nowadays, in this village and all the others? There is more to tell!"

In an atmosphere of sudden consternation, the interrogation continued. Coba's spirit revealed that she had been part of a coven with members in every Ndyuka village, and that many of her fellow conspirators were still at large. She added that her "colleagues" had sacrificed her in order to keep their vicious business secret. She made no secret about how she would avenge herself: she requested time to unmask every one of those witches.¹⁴ That way, she insisted, the whole filthy coven could be liquidated.

When we strip this dialogue of its supernatural rhetoric, what remains is an announcement by the gaan kuutu to the Ndyuka people: "Our work has not been completed by this single disclosure. We demand a full investigation of the entire Ndyuka nation." It must have required some courage to take that position. The elders, conservative men though they were, here clearly deviated from custom. The reputation of a corpse bearer was—and is—a vulnerable one. Although the avowed belief was that such specialists were mere instruments manipulated by a spirit, often there lurked not far beneath the surface of the audience's minds a suspicion that bearers would attempt to distort the supernatural's message for personal gain. In this particular case the odds were high. The bearers had openly taken a political stance. After Menisaki's daring mission, any demand for another witch-cleansing operation must have seemed almost seditious in the eyes of most Ndyuka authorities. The bearers thus risked being denounced as frauds, not because their apprehensions were not widely shared, but because their suggestions smacked of political scheming. At any rate, the corpse bearers wanted to spread the risk: they complained they were tired of carrying their burden and asked to be relieved.

A fresh team of bearers was summoned to replace them. It confirmed the findings of their colleagues: Sa Coba had indeed promised to reveal a conspiracy that threatened the whole Ndyuka nation. Now the very apprehensions that once prompted Menisaki to journey to Diitabiki were being voiced again, only this time by a soul in possession of secret knowledge. It was decided to use the ghost as an instrument for uncovering the unholy conspiracy.

This was a novel and spectacular departure from Ndyuka tradition. It meant a witch's ghost would be consulted as an oracle. Popular excitement grew feverish.¹⁵ Although permission for this unusual interrogation—as far as we know, nothing of the kind had occurred in Ndyuka history before—had to come from Gaanman Oseyse, few doubted that it

would be refused. There was too much pressure on the Gaanman and his advisers; they were certain to give in to popular demand.

A special palaver convened in Diitabiki. Oseyse and Saka gravely heard out the elders before announcing their decision. (As custodian of the ancient tribal obiya, Saka's voice carried as much weight as Oseyse's, especially on a case such as this.) Whatever misgivings they, the two most powerful men in Ndyuka society, might have harbored, they dared not thwart the populace. Earlier they had scolded Menisaki, but had not been in a position to refuse his request for the extraordinary oath taking. Now, with so many Opu elders assembled in Puketi,¹⁶ the leaders could not very well ignore or deny this proposal. And so, on the second day of the inquest and to no one's astonishment, the palaver at Diitabiki granted permission for a sequel. At

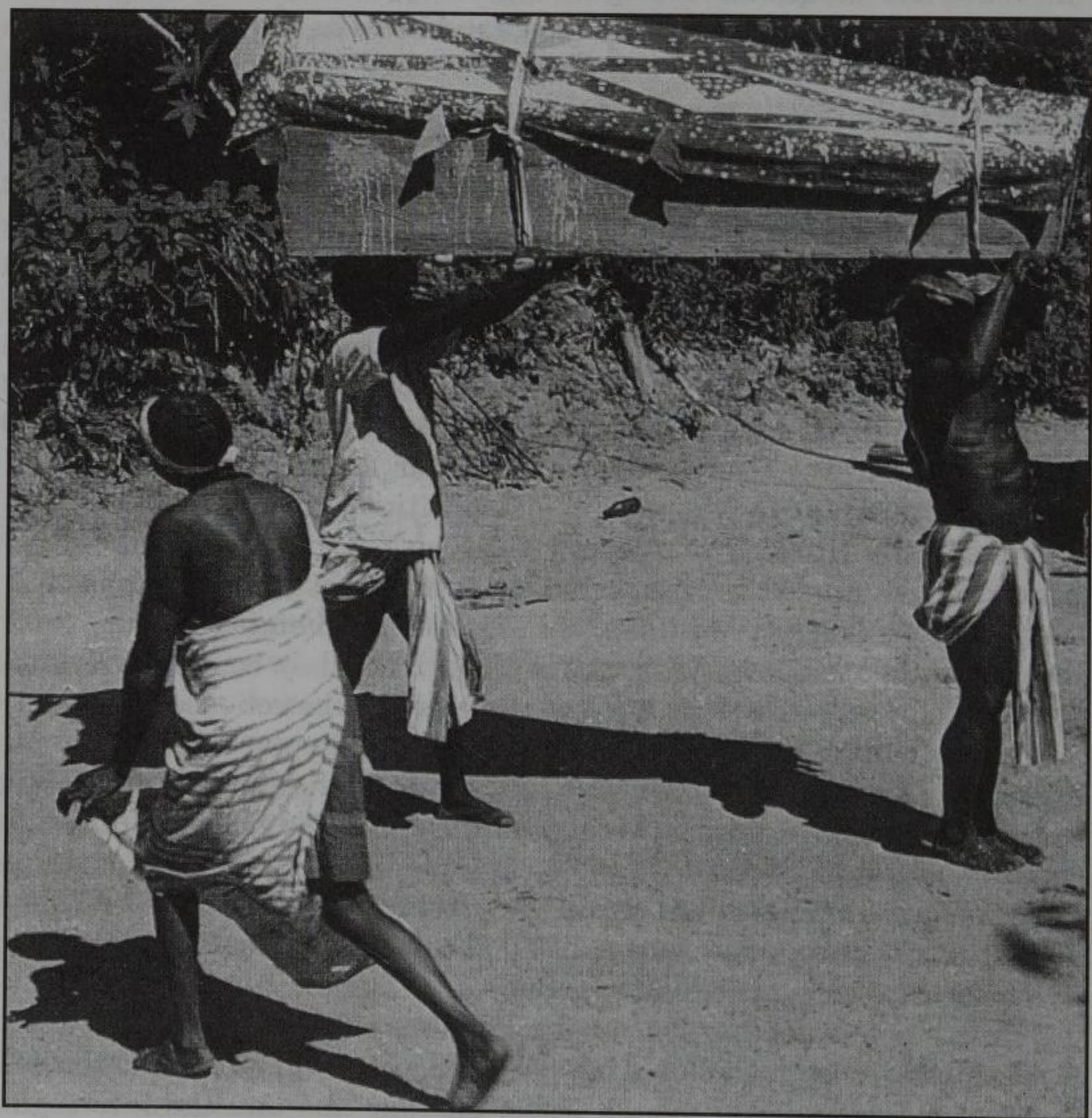


Figure 10 A woman taking leave of her deceased husband—the coffin burial
Coba never got. (Photograph courtesy of Silvia W. de Groot)

that time, no one could have predicted that the witch hunt would run for weeks and leave no village untouched. ✓

THE COBA ORACLE

Puketi, the place where this unprecedented inquest was to be held, was not a typical Ndyuka village. It consisted of two communities: Woo Wataa Abaa and Bilosei Puketi (see fig. 2 in chapter 1). Together these formed the ancient capital of the Ndyuka nation. During the final decades of the eighteenth century, Puketi had been the residence of the Paramount Chief and the postholder, the white representative of the colonial government. Many venerable shrines were located there, and even today, national rites cannot be satisfactorily completed without prayers and libations at its ancient holy places. Finally, Puketi was strategically located: it belonged to a cluster of villages that straddle the Opu and Bilo territories. Although the significance of this geographical distinction has often been overstated in the older literature, it nonetheless does occasionally play a role in Ndyuka politics. Because of its location, Puketi would recruit elders from both Opu and Bilo. That certainly must have accelerated the spread of the witch-purification movement over the Tapanahoni region. p. 18

Once the interrogation resumed, the significance of the inquest grew clearer with each passing day. The ad hoc committee supervising the inquest during its first two days was expanded to include elders from Diitabiki and other villages, thereby gradually evolving into "The Investigation Committee for All of Ndyuka." Shortly after Oseyse gave it permission to continue this ghost interrogation, it ordained that all adults of Puketi, male and female alike, were to pass beneath the bier supporting Coba's corpse. Innocents would pass freely, but those who found their passage barred by the bearers' sudden movements or lowering of the corpse's plank would be considered either witches or other antisocials. They were to undergo a purification ritual for which they had to pay the elders. Visitors from neighboring villages, attracted to the scene by the promise of sensational revelations, could, "if their hearts urged them to do so," submit to the screening as well.¹⁷ /

The subjection of Puketi's inhabitants and other "volunteers" to witchcraft screening was in itself not unusual. In the past, entire villages had sometimes been spiritually investigated after doubts had been raised about the identity of the person responsible for a death. But some aspects of the inquest at Puketi certainly were novel. These developed after Saka left Diitabiki to spend a few weeks in his rustic forest camp, which lay two days upstream from Diitabiki. Many Ndyuka elders maintained such get-aways. They enjoyed an occasional stay in the quiet and secure ambiance of their camps with only "the children" (their

dependents) about, where fish and game were far more plentiful than in the forests surrounding the cluster of ten crowded villages that included Diitabiki. It was therefore probably not political maneuvering that led Saka to withdraw to his forest camp. More likely, he simply misjudged the situation. All accounts stress that once he understood what had been going on at Puketi during his absence, Saka was convinced that the gaan kuutu had deliberately sprung an unpleasant surprise on him.

In any event, matters developed dramatically after Saka's departure. First the witchcraft ordeal was made obligatory for all Tapanahoni Ndyuka from Poligudu at the mouth of the river to the farthest bush camp on the stream's upper reaches. Every Ndyuka adult was instructed to pass under the bier so that Coba's ghost could point out her former accomplices. As some historians put it: "Coba crossed over them. The water of the corpse fell on everybody"¹⁸ With hundreds of Ndyuka pouring into Puketi, and with a constant flow of new witchcraft accusations, the whole of Tapanahoni society was in turmoil. Second, as the weeks passed by, the supernatural process became redefined. Not only was it now accepted that the decomposing corpse still harbored Coba's ghost, she was also believed to be an instrument in the hands of Sweli Gadu. The gaan kuutu divined that Sweli had mounted Coba (Sweli subi Coba). Such a definition of the situation could only mean that Saka's colleagues in the Sweli cult considered the inquiry at Puketi to be a legitimate search for witches, an investigation from which they could no longer remain aloof. Finally, new and innovative rituals were created to purify the discovered witches so that they could be restored to their former standing as honorable citizens. Which obiya's priests performed these rites is no longer known with certainty. Probably it was the Sweli's; they were, after all, the only ones who had an antiwitchcraft "apparatus."

THE SILENCE OF THE NIGHT

The obligatory screening, the cleansing rituals, and the fines on convicted witches all attest that this was a monumental eradication effort. Soon it began to acquire even more ambitious characteristics. Once the screening process was underway, the Investigation Committee declared that Sa Coba's ghost, assisted by Sweli, would exorcise all possessing spirits that could pose threats to their human mediums (*asi* or *wentiman*¹⁹) or to the community. It was felt that mediums, particularly the *kunuman* (the *asi* of avenging spirits), had already done too much harm to the health of their own kith and kin by using possessing spirits for their own selfish purposes. The world of the Kumanti spirits remained above suspicion because avenging spirits never belong to the domain of the Kumanti; their mediums are often respected shamans. But all other spirit mediums—those who had been

invaded by Yooka (ghosts), Ampuku (bush spirits), and Papagadu or Vodou (snake gods)—would have to undergo much more intensive and critical examinations than the one that any aspiring medium traditionally faced when seeking legitimation of its spirit at the onslaught of possession. Older men and women who held dominant positions at the spirit medium shrines would face similar scrutiny.

Apart from the massive screening of people, this inspection of the wentiman was the most far-reaching step taken. A medium rightly considers his or her possessing spirit to be property, something that has been dearly paid for in terms of time and money. Any medium has acquired cultural capital in the form of secret lore and has found a way to give voice to some part of a supernatural's (or the asi's own repressed) strivings. Exorcism therefore implies the nullification of years of instruction as well as financial losses. It also means giving up any hope of influencing village affairs through mediumship. For many, exorcism results in social degradation and emotional impoverishment. Thus custodians of the spirit shrines in Puketi and in some thirty other Tapanahoni villages suffered considerable hardship during the Coba investigations because no more fee-paying supplicants or apprentices came to their shrines and, just as painful, because they could no longer wield influence through divination.

The events at Puketi were by far the most extensive iconoclastic (tradition and image destroying) and witch eradicating movements that ever swept through the interior.²⁰ Within two or three months, hundreds of mediums were dispossessed of their spirits. All potentially harmful supernatural beings, or any spiritual agencies that operated in indifference to the human condition, were immediately exorcised. The only spirits tolerated as "riders" in possessions were those, like the Kumanti, who would never haunt the living as kunu furies. This wholesale exorcism, and the accompanying destruction of shrines, fetishes, and other obiya, lives on in Ndyuka history as *Coba puu sani*, the time when "Coba removed [evil] things."

The case of Ma Amalesi of the village of Diitabiki is representative. Ma Amalesi, with other villagers, was ordered to appear before Coba at Puketi. After she had crept under the bier, the Investigation Committee, basing its judgment on the movements of the bearers, concluded that all was not well. She was not thought to be a witch, but her mediumship of an Ampuku bush spirit made Coba's ghost uncomfortable. (That Ma Amelisi was a medium must have been known to the committee well in advance). Ampuku are believed to have little regard for the welfare of human beings; it is also hard to rein one in once it has discovered its own goals. Hence Ma Amalesi's possessing spirit was considered a threat to the human community. She was sent back to Diitabiki to fetch all her cult paraphernalia and hand them over to the committee. These were burned along with the cult objects

censoring
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of dozens of other mediums. Her Ampuku spirit was exorcised with a simple ablution. A generation later, long after Amalesi's death, that same Ampuku returned. It took possession of Ma Foida, Amalesi's sister's daughter.

The religious reformation based on *Coba puu sani* was, by any measure, a true revolution: it simultaneously centralized ecclesiastic power in the hands of an elite and squashed freelance competition. One historian, da Asawooko, recalled his mother's words about the immediate aftermath. Ma Foida, still a young girl when Sa Coba's corpse was being carried in Puketi, had witnessed the sensational events:

[There was] complete nocturnal silence. Only the river could be heard at night, everything else was so quiet! It was such an eerie silence [because the sound of singing, shouting, and howling of mediums during their trances had completely vanished from the village night.] But only five, maybe seven years later, the spirits were back again. Different spirits, sure, but the effect was the same.

Rumors about the purges in Tapanahoni soon reached the missionaries on the Coast and gave them heart. They cheered the news that spirit shrines were being torched and fetishes thrown into the river. However, they tended to overestimate the theological effects of this welcomed iconoclastic movement. Many believed the Ndyuka to be attempting to purify Maroon religion of its lesser supernatural beings, which would leave only the High Gods as competition for the missionaries. These, they believed, they had a chance to redefine in acceptable Christian terms. But the people who sat on the *gadu kuutu* had no such aims in mind. As we have seen, this investigating committee left all Kumanti spirits untouched. Kersten (1896:185), who briefly visited Diitabiki in 1895 to discuss founding a missionary school there, was astounded to see spirit shrines and other cult objects everywhere. When he asked Chief Oseyse for clarification, he received the following reply: "We have done away with the evil spirits; all the good ones we kept." Seeing their hopes for the eradication of "idolatry" frustrated, most missionaries soon turned against the movement. Matters grew worse when Gaan Tata's priests began proselytising among converts to Christianity.

THE POWER BEHIND COBA'S GHOST

During those weeks of purges, Puketi was the scene of a continuous carnival. Ndyuka from all Tapanahoni villages were there, showing off their finest clothes, eager for every hint of scandal, reveling in the excitement and sensations each new day brought. But who was running this show? Once the sensational news from Puketi reached them, important Captains and other influential elders from most if not all Ndyuka villages had hurried to join their colleagues there. A

Captain among the Ndyuka is more than a village headman. When he visits another village, he is still considered a Kabiten. This is roughly equivalent to treating the visiting mayor of New York in Los Angeles as a mayor there as well, receiving not only the respect due to his office but being expected to perform its tasks and responsibilities (Köbben 1979:87–88). Who was actually behind the fact that an ordinary inquest had mutated into a witchcraft eradication movement with strong iconoclastic overtones?

It is unlikely that the gaan kuutu planned all this. These men had no more idea where their daily decisions would lead them than anyone else. The gaan kuutu was a honorific title for a collection of influential elders who wouldn't usually meet together. Certainly, the basi fu olo (officers of the gravediggers' association) constituted an important voice. They were, after all, responsible for the proper execution of corpse divination. But neither the gravediggers nor their leaders constituted an organization with political and economic interests to defend, and one cannot assume that the gravediggers or their officers operated as a power group with clear political aims. From the Cottica to the Opu villages, people say of gravediggers and such elders that, *Oloman anga lanti náá kondee* ("Gravediggers and elders don't have a village"), because their loyalties should be with all Ndyuka and not stop with the inhabitants of their natal villages. No, this purge did not originate in the minds of the gravediggers or the elders. All the evidence indicates that they were just as surprised as anybody else by the turn events took. They were more interested in sharing the responsibility than in trying to give direction to those developments.

Blaming the upheaval on systematic planning by the political and religious leaders does not make sense either. First, Saka played no role whatsoever in starting the screening at Puketi: he merely resigned himself to it. Second, Saka had an alibi: he was far away, in his Upstream forest camp, when the witch craze broke out. There is little doubt his followers informed him of events at Puketi: Saka had a network of spies reaching into every Upriver village, and some Downriver ones as well. One thing seems certain: Saka was not in favor of prolonging Coba's inquest; it took business away from his obiya. He probably hoped that the whole thing would just blow over. It appeared that Saka had lost control of the situation.²¹

Another likely suspect is Oseyse, Paramount Chief since 1884. Did Oseyse orchestrate all these theatrics to undercut his "uncle" Saka's influence on religious affairs? Appealing as the suggestion might seem, there is little to substantiate it and much to refute it. Certainly, Oseyse had a motive. He did not like the caucus of old religious bosses that Saka controlled. However, Oseyse had neither the means nor the dedicated following it would have taken to manipulate the Puketi investigations, or to enforce their decisions. Moreover, when an oppor-

tunity did present itself to restore Diitabiki's grip on the gaan kuutu, he had quickly sided with Saka!

When we queried them about the notables then in charge at Puketi, our historians were not of much assistance. Although several sections of the Coba purges were related to us in great detail, no one could actually name the gravediggers who first made the startling announcements about Coba's ghost's disclosures. When we pressed them, they offered a few suggestions, but always in a rather hypothetical way: "Well, it could have been Father Dyenta or Father Asawiki, they were bosses of the gravediggers at that time." We came to recognize the pointlessness of asking for names or for leaders, of trying to figure out which power groups had been responsible for what, and concluded that the Coba Inquiries and everything that accompanied them were instigated by a popular movement.

Consider the following facts. The movement received wide support from elders and gravediggers. Several teams of bearers must have carried Coba's remains, which suggests that support for screening and purges had to be widespread among members of the gravediggers' association, which represented a large segment of the adult male population. The composition of the gaan kuutu itself almost guaranteed that influential elders would connive at, and perhaps even encourage, a witch hunt. Later, when the screening test became obligatory, the cooperation of elders in every Tapanahoni village had been secured. Since the prevailing system of governance depended on decisions arrived at in a kuutu, a considerable portion of the male population must have looked favorably on the Puketi Inquiries.

The unexpected originality of these investigations, the notable absence of any prophet or other charismatic leader to author them, and the wholesale endorsement they received from elders and gravediggers, all suggest that the Puketi Inquiries were a popular uprising, a true mass uprising of people who had grown tired of the (perceived) excesses of witches and "were not going to take it anymore." Earlier, a couple of years before Coba's death, Menisaki had been escorted by dignitaries from many Downriver villages on a journey to Diitabiki, where he demanded action against the supernatural evils he saw threatening Ndyuka society. That event indicates the genesis of the witch mania. It demonstrates a widespread sense of insecurity, a pervasive fear of all the evil, jealous people whom the Ndyuka imagined to resent the newly rich in their (heretofore relatively egalitarian) society. The concept "witches" is merely a cultural shorthand for this omnipresent cultural anxiety, as "communism" was and "terrorism" is in our society.

We submit that the energy behind this whole affair emanated from the boat owners, from that segment of the adult male population that had, during the preceding decade, established itself as transport

carriers for the gold industries of Suriname and French Guiana. Three successive gold rushes had drawn thousands of fortune hunters to the Marowijne-Lawa basin, and hundreds of Ndyuka boat owners had profited from them. Today, few of these advocates of the antiwitchcraft campaign are still remembered as such. But that they constituted the social anchorage of the movement is indicated by the fact that "have-nots" were always its main suspects. Women, particularly older ones, were prime candidates. (Women did not transport miners, or grow rich from that trade.) Those without many possessions were for that very reason believed to have a motive for committing the heinous crimes of which witches were said to be capable. Consumed by envy they would enlist any supernatural agency to help them hurt their enemies and rivals, causing misfortune and suffering. Witches, it was "known," would even poison their own more prosperous kin.

This was the first great witch craze that shook the Ndyuka people. There is no historical documentation suggesting that anything even remotely comparable ever happened before 1890. There would be witch crazes later, but never on this scale.

Notes

¹ The name Gaan Tata is not used as often as it was in the past. Nowadays, Ndyuka usually refer to Gaan Gadu or Bigi Gadu (Thoden van Velzen 1966a). Kersten, a missionary who visited the Tapanahoni in 1895 (MBB 1896:195) noted that the name Gaan Gadu was used by Saka as a synonym for Gaan Tata.

² Source: Da Asawooko of the Misidyan clan in Diitabiki village.

³ Source: Da Kofi Atyaukili, Dyu clan, Mainsi village.

⁴ This practice was very similar to the oath taking among the Aluku. Bilby (1997:674–675) describes it with the following words:

The oath was administered in the form of an herbal concoction that each individual was required to drink. By swallowing this mixture, the oath takers swore their fidelity not only to the moral code enforced by Tata Odun, the Sweli Gadu, but to the Aluku Paramount Chief himself, who served as the principal custodian of Odun's shrines and oracles. Foremost among Tata Odun's laws is the prohibition against using spiritual or magical power to harm other human beings. It is said that those who had secretly been acting as *wisiman*, or sorcerers, would perish soon after consuming the potion, having been struck down by the wrath of Tata Odun.

⁵ This is an excerpt from a letter written by Johannes King, a Matawai who converted to Christianity in 1857. During the 1860s he founded a strong "Moravian" community among the Matawai. His letter was directed to the Praeses (Director) of the Evangelical Brethren in Paramaribo.

⁶ Other names mentioned in the early accounts of the movement are Masaa Jehovah and Bakaa (MTB 1895:52), respectively "Master Jehovah" and "European or non-tribal person, outsider." (Among Maroons "Ingi" [Amerindians] are not considered Bakaa.)

⁷ Chris de Beet and Miriam Serman, personal communication, 9 January 1991.

⁸ The only exception is Spalburg's diary, which he kept at Diitabiki between 1896 and 1900 (Spalburg 1979). Unfortunately, we have no comparable accounts of the more revolutionary years, roughly the period between 1888 and 1895, which preceded Spalburg's stay. Another disadvantage is that when Spalburg resided in Diitabiki, the center of gravity in Gaan Tata worship had shifted to Gaanboli, a village that lay a full

day's canoe trip (upriver) from Diitabiki. In the literature, only W. F. van Lier's (1919) book and parts of Morssink (1932–1935) proved helpful. As a prospector for the balata extraction industry, van Lier worked with Ndyuka laborers in the 1910s. He was deeply interested in Ndyuka history, and particularly in the tribe's (socio-political, religious) evolution during the first two decades of the twentieth century. But neither van Lier nor Morssink mentions the most crucial events leading up to the founding of the Gaan Tata cult. The Ndyuka historian and ethnographer André Pakosie's account of those years (1999) overlaps our own (Thoden van Velzen & van Wetering, 1988). What we mean by the term "historian" is explained in chapter 17.

- ⁹ The only group of "New Runaways" in the Cottica region in the early nineteenth century was the Kaabu Olo group. Around 1834, these Runaways started negotiations with Ndyuka working in lumber camps along the Cottica. In that same year, Gaanman Beeyman (term of office: 1833–1866) gave the Cottica Ndyuka permission to track them down and hand them over to the colonial authorities (CIB 3:68). The Kaabu Olo Maroons, however, were not defeated, as shown by the fact that the colonial government organized new patrols against them in 1836, 1844, and 1846. The Kaabu Olo people were in frequent contact with Ndyuka and with plantation slaves (NWI 819:725; 819:747; 820:55). Dr. Wim Hoogbergen kindly provided us with archival documents on the Kaabu Olo group.
- ¹⁰ Da Babe, interviewed in Diitabiki village, 19 October 1970.
- ¹¹ We are not sure about the specifics of the relationship between Oseyse and Menisaki. Menisaki probably trained Oseyse in the use and lore of Kumanti obiya.
- ¹² Da Amatali, interviewed in Diitabiki, 21 April 1979.
- ¹³ Cf. Danquah 1928:238; Field (1937:200; 1960:77); Jacobson-Widding (1979:234); Rat-tray (1927:167–174); and Rosenthal (1998:212ff).
- ¹⁴ The expression used was: *Sa Coba puu ala den wisiman a gogo* (Sister Coba yanked all the witches' rumps).
- ¹⁵ Several older men from Diitabiki, explaining the significance of this development, told us how their mothers and fathers, as young women and men, had grasped its importance and gone to Puketi to miss as little as possible of this singular event.
- ¹⁶ Menisaki's delegation was almost entirely composed of elders from the Bilo segment. But Puketi was an Opu village, and therefore attracted many more Opu from neighboring villages.
- ¹⁷ Sources on the punishment of witches are contradictory. Some claim the investigators were very lenient, demanding only that suspects undergo a cleansing ritual. Others mention fines, humiliations, and even floggings. Whatever actually took place, to be unmasked as a witch and then subjected to a public purification amounts to being humiliated and punished.
- ¹⁸ In Ndyuka: *Coba abaa den. A dede wataa kai na ala sama*. One of our sources, Da Afanyaka of Puketi, contested this point; he denied that anybody had ever been made to pass beneath a bier. Lined up against him are historians of Gaanboli, Diitabiki, several Bilo elders, and Da Kassiyeki and Da Pauwkale, two eminent historians from Godoolo and Yawsa respectively. The latter villages were not party to a later dispute pitting Diitabiki and Gaanboli against Puketi, probably about whether it was ever proper for Puketi elders to order people to crawl beneath a corpse, especially that of a witch.
- ¹⁹ An older word for medium is *gaduman* or a *gadu masaa*, "the master of the god."
- ²⁰ In view of the evidence we have on large-scale disturbances in eighteenth-century Saamaka society (de Beet and Thoden van Velzen 1977:105–111), it seems a bit hazardous to make such claims for the Coba purges. Yet we know of no evidence that any of the Saamaka purges spread to other parts of the interior, for instance, to the Tapanahoni. But the shock waves spreading from Puketi could not be confined to the Tapanahoni valley.
- ²¹ Our historians from the Gaanboli group, mainly Da Amatali (Ayauna) and Da Papa Amoikudu, emphasized Saka's bitterness at the untrustworthiness of human beings, and of his "friends" in particular.

Saka Retaliates and Finds a Diva

SAKA'S TRAUMATIC JOURNEY

While the investigations at Puketi gained momentum, with hundreds of Ndyuka journeying to "Coba's oracle," Saka rested in "Bilo Wataa," his forest camp, not far from today's Gaanboli. Saka did not like the news his spies brought him: it smacked of revolt against his religious authority. One day a message arrived that left him thunderstruck: he was ordered to appear before the Coba oracle with all of his "dependents." He, Saka, the reigning religious authority in all of Ndyuka, who had thought himself above the meddling concerns of Puketi's gravediggers, was expected to submit himself to judgment by a witch's ghost! He was to be tested by these people like some ignorant commoner! To add insult to injury, he was also informed that the Sweli, his own obiya, but now merged with Coba's corpse, would screen him. Influential elders at the Puketi gathering had declared the fusion of the Sweli and Coba's oracle a *fait accompli*.

Seeing that the gaan kuutu felt strong enough to challenge him, it must have dawned on Saka that he had let control of the Sweli obiya slip out of his hands; he had seriously underestimated the Puketi inquiries' popular appeal and wrongly assessed the forces behind it. The massive submission to the Sweli ordeal that followed Menisaki's prompting had obviously not allayed people's fears. Worse, Saka had foolishly tolerated the emergence of a new oracle that operated beyond his control. For the first time in Ndyuka history, people could consult

the Sweli directly about witchcraft and other grave issues, and they did so on a regular basis—and in public. No carry oracle of national stature had ever been available for such “democratic” inquests until the bier with Coba’s decaying remains caused his Sweli to serve as one.¹ And what had he done while all these unprecedented changes were being brought about? He went fishing!

Saka decided to redress the situation by seizing the initiative. He assembled all his dependents and forbade them to subject themselves to the Coba oracle. Then Saka and a few trusted followers took to their boats and journeyed to Diitabiki. Today this traumatic journey is engraved in the memory of Saka’s descendants as his hour of trial. His grandchildren still recall his account of the journey in painful detail; they can even list those to whom he spoke when stopping at forest camps and villages on his way downriver.

Gradually, Saka began to comprehend the scope of his problems. His vaunted network of “devoted” followers and friends had crumbled away during the frenzy at Puketi. One example: at the Godoolo boat landing, Da Anono, one of his confidants and occasional spies, reminded him: “Father Saka, you’ll have to appear before the Coba oracle, you and your children.” Saka expressed outrage. He rejected any notion that he, or his “children,” could be forced to undergo the witchcraft test. It is recalled today that he said: “My children will not crawl under the body of a witch, the corpse of a filthy witch that should have been gotten rid of weeks ago. My children will never tolerate the oloman carrying that corpse around them! I have my own obiya to work with!” That was how he responded to the elders at Godoolo and at other places where he stopped. It was also the answer he gave Oseyse when the Gaanman asked him to surrender to the wishes of the people.²

A few days after his arrival at Diitabiki, Saka finished his preparations. The only way to get the upper hand, he must have realized, was to offer the Ndyuka people a different carry oracle, one that would fulfill the same needs as Coba’s did. But which one? Sweli was not a good choice: Saka had lost control over it. Most of the other ancient obiya were considered too weak. People were familiar with their powers and clearly believed them inadequate. But that did not apply to the grand obiya from the war of independence, the original, unadulterated Gaan Tata or Gwangwela. That obiya lay buried at Saantigoon. Saka concluded that it had to be exhumed. However, two problems had to be solved before he could hope to access such a powerful, “pure” obiya. First, there was the religious and technical problem of how to “enrich” the diluted Gaan Tata obiya until its strength was equal to the original one buried at Saantigoon—a point that needs some explanation.

Sometime after the 1760 peace treaty, the Ndyuka decided that their obiya from the years of armed struggle against the whites and

their mercenaries was simply too powerful for peacetime. That obiya had many names, each representing one of its various components. Since it was an absolute necessity to keep the witches at bay, it was decided to split off and retain the Sweli Gadu part. That Sweli fragment became the nucleus of the nineteenth century poison ordeal. But the Gaan Tata fragment, a weapon of war that people used to carry into the thick of the battle whenever it was needed, that part was buried. It was simply too powerful for peacetime conditions. This Gaan Tata could only be consulted when two bearers carried it on their heads. Weaker parts of Gaan Tata had been transferred from generation to generation until they came into the possession of Saka, but these were not fit to function as a carry oracle. After the success of the Coba Inquiries, Saka could not return to the practice of consulting obiya in the seclusion of a shrine; that would have meant a step down.

The second task was to convince people of the authenticity and strength of the new contender, which was no mean feat in view of the enormous popularity of the Coba oracle and the close cooperation that the gaan kuutu had managed to secure with Oseyse and other influential notables. When Saka advised Oseyse about his audacious project, the Gaanman counseled against it: "What is buried should remain buried; the obiya has already caused too much strife in the past" (Morssink 1932-1935). Oseyse kept urging Saka to submit himself to the Coba-cum-Sweli oracle, rather than launching a risky innovation by himself. But Saka never wavered.

SAKA'S OFFENSIVE

Exactly how Saka came into the possession of the undiluted Gaan Tata oracle is known by oral historians. The most complete account was related to us by one of his grandchildren who pointed out that Saka used cunning and deceit to achieve this goal. This is how Saka succeeded in replacing the Coba oracle with one under his supervision.

Saka took to his boat early one morning and headed for the ancient sanctuary at Saantigoon. A few trusted followers and one of his sons accompanied him. To solve the first problem, how to "enrich" the obiya to its former strength, Saka required tools. He selected a relatively unknown Kumanti carry oracle. This happened to be a convenient choice: since the oracle was owned by his own matrilineal group, there was no need to ask other people and potential rivals for permission. Second, Kumanti deities were above suspicion, having survived the grand investigations at Puketi unscathed. Upon arrival, Saka ordered his followers to wait at an open place in the forest of Saantigoon, a natural waiting room for the uninitiated. He then walked over to the holy place, dug up the objects connected with the old Gaan Tata cult, and returned to the antechamber. There the Kumanti bundle, the

repository of a Kumanti deity, was fastened to a plank whose ends were placed on the heads of two bearers. Divination could now begin. Its main purpose would be to legitimize the undertaking and obtain directions from the Kumanti spirit for constructing a Gaan Tata with the same powers as the ancient original. The problem was getting the objects Saka had just dug up to merge with the familiar but weak components of the Gaan Tata obiya that Saka and his priests had worked with for decades.

That morning, cooperation from the Kumanti obiya was secured. This established a link between the traditional religion of the nineteenth century and the new obiya Saka was forging. At the end of the day, Saka and his small group of followers returned to Diitabiki with two obiya: the ancient Kumanti obiya and the "enriched" Gaan Tata obiya. To stress the departure from the past, the new obiya was now called Gaan Gadu obiya [Great Deity obiya] or *Tata Ede* [Father (Carried on the) Head].

Now came Saka's most difficult task, persuading the Ndyuka, in the midst of their euphoria, to get rid of the Coba oracle.

After he returned from Saantigoon late one evening, Father Saka went to the boat landing of Diitabiki, Ma Dyemba's [Saka's foster mother's] old landing, you know, the muddy one. He carried a beer bottle that he hid by tying it to the underside of a boat. At the break of day, father Saka walked over to Oseyse's house and called him: "Brother Sei [a diminutive], things happened to me yesterday, you wouldn't believe it. Somebody pinched a bottle of beer of mine." Gaanman Oseyse replied: "Well, that's your problem uncle, why don't you look for the thief among your own children?" But father Saka insisted that they would look into the matter jointly. Father Saka said: "I am sure that none of my children did it. But fortunately, I have a way of knowing now. I possess an obiya that can decide the issue for us. Let us carry this obiya and see what it comes up with."

The two men took a paddle from a boat. Father Saka fastened a small bundle containing the obiya to the middle of the paddle. Father Saka carried the back end of the paddle; Gaanman Oseyse carried the front. And so the two men became the first bearers of Gaan Gadu.

They explained to the obiya what their problem was: "A beer bottle is missing, show us obiya, where is it?" But what the two men were really doing was to test the powers of the obiya [*den pubee en luku*]. Then came the first question: "Did people from another village steal the beer bottle?" The obiya, in response, forced its bearers to move in circles. This was thought to mean that the one who took it away was not from another village, but from Diitabiki itself. The two men then politely begged the obiya to help them recover the bottle. The obiya consented with an affirmative nod. Then they were pushed toward the river, straight to the muddy landing. Gaanman Oseyse asked: "Why did you bring us

here? Where is the bottle? In one of the boats perhaps?" The obiya moved its bearers sideways, a clear negative reply. "Under one of the boats perhaps?" The obiya nudged its bearers forward, a clear "Yes." And they found the beer bottle under the boat.

Father Saka was enraptured that the obiya worked so well. Gaanman Oseyse was equally impressed. However the obiya itself proved to be dissatisfied. The obiya spoke: "Now let me give you a piece of my mind. You two men appear to have tested me, as if you had no faith in me whatsoever. You will have to pay me for this lack of trust."

The obiya then pronounced that Oseyse had to pay twelve pangi [a wrap-around skirt that also functions as a traditional form of payment for fees and fines] and one wicker bottle with rum. And this explains why today witches, after treatment, have to pay exactly these goods in the same quantities. Father Saka, however, had to pay much more. The obiya reprimanded him for displaying so little trust while he should have known better. The obiya reminded him that his foster mother, Ma Dyemba, had taught him the secrets of Saantigoon. Saka was fined 30 pangi and six wicker bottles with rum, that is what our father Saka had to pay.³

Now the obiya was ready *fu tyai en a ganda* [to be shown to the public]. The following day everybody in Lon Wataa [area around Diitabiki] had a chance to see for themselves what a wonderful carry oracle they had been given. After father Saka and Gaanman Oseyse had carried Gaan Gadu, its first regular bearers were father Saka's sister's son and Gaanman Oseyse's son. And so we got our Gaan Gadu, which we also call Gaan Tata.

This is the story as Saka's grandchildren told it to us.⁴ Two other historians related similar but shorter accounts. Of significance to us was Pakosie's (1999:55–57) version of this part of Ndyuka history. Pakosie is a Ndyuka shaman, a herbalist, but also a historian. His version is shorter than the one told by Saka's grandchildren, but concurs with it fully.

For those unfamiliar with Ndyuka religion, the scene must appear a crude mixture of burlesque and quackery. Yet, for an intelligent man like Saka, and for other Ndyuka who came to hear about it, it had none of these qualities. The historian Da Ayawna, for example, who was the first to relate this account to us, asked us several times whether his story about the powers of the obiya, and Da Saka's role, had not impressed us. Only a few moments earlier the same Ayawna had explained in great detail how Saka had prepared the occasion by hiding the bottle himself. That Saka had helped the obiya was no proof for Ayawna that the great man was a swindler. Saka believed utterly in the powers of the old Gaan Tata oracle, but he needed to convince Oseyse and do it quickly. With the implications of the Puketi Inquiries becoming clearer every day, Saka had no time to wait for the wavering Oseyse to be persuaded by "ordinary" supernatural proof. An oracle proves its

efficacy when the testimony of its patients who have regained their health is delivered before its priests. Waiting for such results would take too long, and Saka therefore sought to speed things up.

It is also instructive to consider the implications behind the fact that Saka had asked Oseyse to take the more prestigious front position in the carrying of paddle and bundle. A front bearer is considered more responsible for the quality of the divination. If fraud takes place—and Ndyuka maintain that some bearers occasionally resort to it—then it is usually the front bearer who is faulted. Equally important, Saka expected the test to be added proof of the obiya's value, for it is believed that the forces emanating from the bundle press most strongly on the front bearer. In fact it is much easier for the rear bearer to surreptitiously influence the obiya's movements. Saka probably felt that he had eliminated unnecessary risks by hiding the bottle himself. This was the best way to learn whether Oseyse was interpreting the obiya's directives correctly. If Oseyse had attempted to distort the divination, Saka would have known, for he was in the best position to observe Oseyse: he could see and feel him move.

As word of Saka's new and improved oracle spread, initial reactions proved to be favorable. Council meetings were proclaimed for all the Tapanahoni Ndyuka. For three days, the Captains and other Ndyuka elders convened at Puketi, and thereafter they deliberated for eight more days at Diitabiki. Oseyse and Saka presided jointly over both occasions, wearing the official uniforms they had received from the authorities in Paramaribo.

One of the first decisions of the palaver was to dissolve the gaan kuutu, and to finally bury Coba's putrefying remains in a shallow grave—after the status of the deceased had been upgraded from witch to sinner. Respect for Sweli, who had made prolonged use of the corpse as His vehicle, caused the assembly to accept this compromise between a decent burial and the ignoble one reserved for witches. More significantly, the kuutu resolved that all decisions of the Coba oracle were to be honored. Both the destruction of evil objects and the exorcism of untrustworthy spirits were applauded as major improvements in the quality of life. "A load was lifted off our minds to know that all these bad spirits were no longer around," one historian recalled his mother telling him.⁵

In defense of the established power relations within the Ndyuka nation, Saka's merger of various obiya was imperative, but dangerous. After he succeeded in getting the oloman to bury Sweli's vehicle, Coba's dead body, something had to be done about the deity Sweli himself. With the help of Oseyse and a few of his own relatives (all Sweli's priests), Saka now made his second move: Sweli Gadu was offered hospitality in the new, sacred bundle of Gaan Gadu or Gaan Tata. To the public, Saka presented the new bundle as a fusion of Sweli Gadu (an obiya the control of which he shared with others) with those that were

his “property,” most famous among which was the ancient Gaan Tata obiya.⁶ Oral historians insist that this solution was acceptable to the great majority of supporters of the Coba oracle. What those congregated at Puketi liked best about Saka’s proposals was that the new oracle would also be consulted in public, just as the bier with Coba’s remains had been carried in the center of the village, and in sharp contrast with consulting procedures at Saka’s shrines in the past. That would make human tampering with divine guidance much more difficult. Only delicate matters, those involving the Gaanman and the ranking priests, were to be put before the deity in the privacy of the Gaan Gadu shrine.

The new carry oracle went a long way toward fulfilling popular demand: it was carried through the village and consulted regularly at a fixed spot in Diitabiki’s center. Individuals from several clans were involved with its operation, reducing the risk that the god’s speech would reflect only the concerns of one or a few families.

But the main thing that the people at Puketi demanded from Saka and his followers was that the war against witchcraft must be the new oracle’s first priority. The hunt for “the enemies within the gates”—as Mayer (1970:62) once aptly called an African society’s witches—was to be the main preoccupation of Gaan Gadu’s priests. What the bagasi-

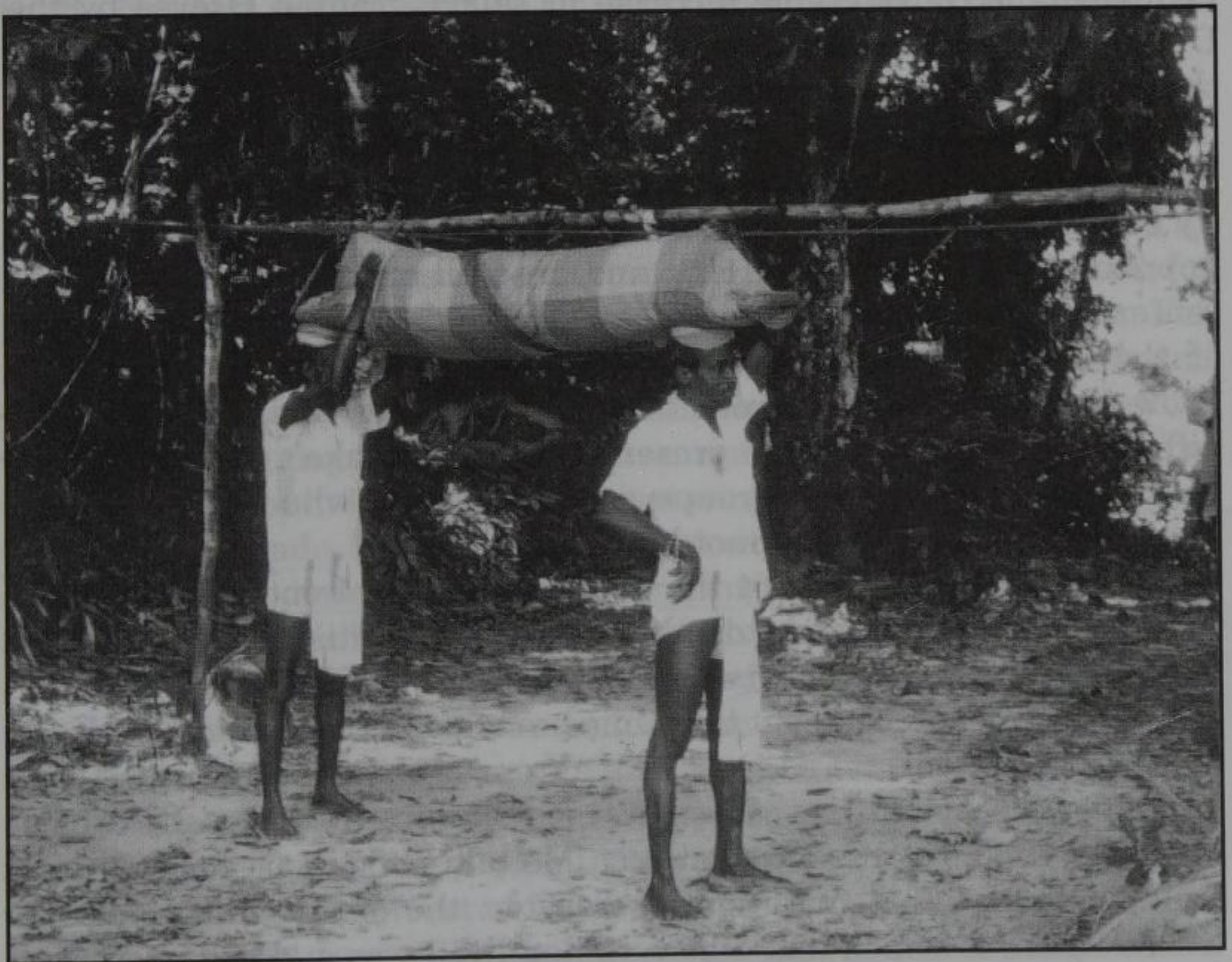


Figure 11 Da Tebu, Gaanboli’s oracle. (Photograph courtesy of Silvia de Groot, 1972)

man (the freight carriers) appeared to have desired most was a "religious machine" that would consolidate the gains of the past few months and defend them with constant vigilance in the future. The boatmen were willing to pay Saka handsome fees, but in return they demanded that their lives, their possessions, and their reputations be protected. They expected Gaan Tata to vindicate them as hard-working citizens of the Ndyuka nation, as people who could walk upright. He who pays the piper calls the tune, and the new cult absorbed every reform that came out of the gaan kuutu, where the influence of the new class of bagasiman had been clearly felt.

Events at Puketi had brought an atmosphere of emergency to a climax, which neither Saka nor anyone else would have been capable of dispelling, even if they had wanted to. Coba's death therefore marks a watershed in Ndyuka religious history, dividing it into two periods: before Coba and after Coba.⁷

SAKA BREAKS WITH THE GAANMAN

Shortly after the triumphant launching of the Gaan Tata oracle, serious trouble erupted between the two most powerful men in the new religious regime. Its exact cause is not fully understood, but some hold that the considerable increase in salary granted Oseyse by the Dutch irked Saka (van Lier 1919:49). The colonial authorities took that step to secure the loyalty of the most important tribal chief in the most sensitive area of Suriname, the disputed territory between the Dutch and the French colonies, a region bristling with economic activity but with borders that would require international arbitration to be approximated (Niermeyer 1891) and are still contested today. Others contend that trouble flared up when Oseyse demanded a larger share of the emoluments pocketed by Saka and his deputies (Morssink 1932-1935). Today, and predictably, Oseyse's descendants present a different view from the one presented to us by Saka's grandchildren. But spokesmen for both groups are unanimous when they explain: "People with long noses cannot kiss!"

There is no doubt about the upshot of the confrontation. In 1891, Saka took his oracle and, together with most of his followers, left to found a new village about two days upstream of Diitabiki, a place he called Gaanboli. From about that time he called his oracle *Da Lebi Koosi* (Father in Red Clothes). Many Ndyuka from various villages joined him, particularly people from the Lon Wataa (Running Water, many rapids) section of the river, the area between Moitaki and Kisai. For Diitabiki, Saka's move was an unmitigated disaster: the entire village quarter where Saka's kinsmen and followers had lived was suddenly deserted. Stripped of its most powerful shrines and its most prestigious priests, Diitabiki attracted far fewer patients and worshippers.

After 1891, Diitabiki became a mere waiting room for Gaanboli. At times, Saka instructed patients to stay there before proceeding to Gaanboli, sometimes for as long as two weeks. Diitabiki's prestige so declined that even Gaanman Oseyse spent more time in Saka's village than in his own "capital." We know this because between 1896 and 1900 the Chief's whereabouts were recorded by Spalburg (1979:88), a teacher cum missionary residing in Diitabiki. During his four years there, Spalburg saw Saka only once, in September 1899. On one of the few days he spent at Diitabiki, Saka, who usually carried his oracle with him on his travels, ostentatiously demonstrated who was actually in command of Ndyuka society at that time. He sent an order to Oseyse to appear before Da Lebi Koosi immediately, and the Gaanman obeyed him (Spalburg 1979:65). On another occasion Saka forbade Oseyse to proceed with the funerary rites for a recently deceased person, until he, Saka, had time to investigate the causes of this particular demise more thoroughly (Spalburg 1979:93).

Shortly after 1900, Oseyse managed to build his own Gaan Tata oracle. He was helped by defectors from Saka's camp who provided him with secret information on how the first obiya had been put together. Oseyse and the defectors stealthily traveled to Saantigoon, manufactured the second Gaan Tata bundle, and then proclaimed this to the Ndyuka nation. And so Diitabiki resumed its place among the foremost ritual centers of Ndyuka society.

As a consequence, a bitter conflict erupted. Saka retaliated by stopping all traffic to Amerindian territory upstream from Gaanboli. This dealt a severe blow to Oseyse and the population in his section of the river, for the region close to the Brazilian border was highly favored by all Ndyuka men. Hunters never returned from there empty handed, for game and fish were in abundance in that sparsely populated area. The few Indians living there offered such desirable goods as dried fish and game for sale or trade, and above all, their greatly admired, well-trained hunting dogs. Oseyse in turn warned Saka that continuation of the blockade would be met with devastating reprisal. Saka was forced to lift the blockade, but he soon found a way to hit back at the Gaanman. His spies discovered Oseyse's ongoing affair with a daughter of one of his wives. Although Oseyse was not his mistress's father, Ndyuka culture labels such liaisons incestuous and judges them as not only scandalous but dangerous because they arouse the wrath of the ancestors. Oseyse's entire lineage now faced retribution by avenging spirits and the gods. This news weakened Oseyse's position considerably. He was summoned to appear before the Gaanboli oracle, found guilty, and punished with house arrest at Gaanboli for a period of a year.

The eventual reconciliation left Oseyse in a much better position. He and Saka reached an agreement that gave each party the right to present its Gaan Tata oracle as an authentic speaker for the deity.

Henceforth, two Gaan Tata oracles would be worshipped: one at Gaanboli, the other at Diitabiki. This remained the case until 1972, when Akalali, a new religious leader claiming mediumship of the Ogii spirit, put an end to the activities of both.

A DIVA COMMANDS THE OBIYA

With the Coba investigations behind him, and the move to Gaanboli completed, one might expect business as usual at Saka's ritual center. However, we do not think Saka was content to fall back on established routines. From the following oral history account, it appears that Saka remained open to new developments. And at least one of these was spectacular: Saka handed over the daily religious and medical operations to a young woman.

Shortly after Saka had left Diitabiki for Gaanboli in 1891, Ma Antenebosu Fiida of the Misidyan clan began to attract attention in the Lon Wataa area around Diitabiki. When still quite young, she had earned a reputation for being one of the greatest vocalists of her day. "If you had heard her sing, you would have given her your last penny," volunteered those Diitabiki elders who recalled being taken to one of her performances when they were still children. Very few singers can hope to attain such prima donna status, but if they do, they will be remembered long after their deaths.

Many Captains journeyed to her natal Pikin Kondee to beg her to perform at their villages. Once such a request was granted, every conceivable honor was bestowed on the singer. Women would search the skin of her feet for sand-flees and then wash and perfume these feet carefully. When the prima donna was about to perform, people would line up from her guesthouse to the village square. Cloths were spread in front of her so that her feet would not touch the earth. These performances were delivered in an atmosphere of exaltation. Decades later, admirers would boast of having been present when she sang that day in a particular village, an event never surpassed in their imaginations.

When Saka invited Fiida to perform at Gaanboli, it was not only her beautiful voice that attracted him. News had reached Saka that Fiida, while visiting Diitabiki at the request of Gaanman Oseyse, had spiced her singing with oracular utterances. During those days, so soon after the Coba purges, any manifestation of spirit possession was considered sensational. As we have seen, all mediums, with the exception of the (almost exclusively male) Kumanti spirit medium cult, had come under suspicion. But what had made Fiida's debut as a singer outside her own village so extraordinary were her claims to be possessed by a new type of spirit. This yeye, although sent by Masaa Gadu, the Creator God, had been chosen to assist Gaan Tata who, according to the gods, had far too much to do. This spirit was called Da

restorer spirit

Amoitee (the Father that is So Beautiful!) or Da Anado. The yeye's message was that it was sent to the world of humans to bolster belief in Gaan Tata. Da Amoitee was assisted by dozens of new invading spirits, called *Gaan Gadu gadu* or *Gaan Gadu wenti* (deities or spirits belonging to Gaan Gadu or Gaan Tata, in other words his deputies).⁸

Such oracular utterances must have sounded reassuring to Saka: obviously Fiida did not intend to challenge the spiritual authority of his Gaan Tata oracle. Rather, this looked like an opportunity to enhance its status. Additionally, Fiida's reputation as a virtuoso singer made her an asset to any village. Saka did not hesitate. A flotilla of boats decked with fluttering flags was sent to Fiida's village to carry her to Gaanboli for an appointment with the deity. Supreme divine endorsement was not long withheld from Fiida's spirit. On the day of her authentication, with Fiida in Gaanboli's village square, Saka and his acolytes consulted the oracle. The deity demanded proof that Fiida's spirit really was sent to the Ndyuka people by Masaa Gadu. The spirit was asked to put in an appearance. When Fiida fell into trance, an unusual event was observed in Gaanboli: a tall bird, probably a crane, waded in the shallow water of the village's boat landings. "Tall as a house," it is claimed—and it did not fly away when people approached it! For three consecutive days, the bird (if it *was* a bird) remained in the same spot. Saka chose to interpret this as the sign demanded by Gaan Tata; he was then convinced that they had an unusual visitor in their midst. Henceforth Fiida was accepted as the medium of Da Amoitee, the spirit held to be Gaan Tata's divine companion.

Cooperation between Saka and Fiida intensified as the years went by. After her arrival at Gaanboli, the Amoitee spirit *subi en moo hebi fasi*, "took a stronger hold of its medium," steeping her in divine power. Fiida demonstrated this by acting as a healer: she cured people by the laying on of hands and other forms of physical contact. Her embrace was said to have especially great curative value. As word spread about miraculous recoveries in Gaanboli, people from all over the Tapanahoni flocked to her for treatment. They came in such great numbers that the whole of the Upper Tapanahoni was said to be hers. A house was set aside for her medical practice. In the back of it was a storeroom, crammed to the top with gifts from patients. On some days, people recall, she would receive as many as fifty pangi and twenty bottles of beer.

Fiida's presence at Gaanboli during the 1890s must have been a great boost for Saka. She certainly added to the prestige and luster of his village. Fiida also exhibited the powers of clairvoyance; she was able not only to inform people about events happening elsewhere but to read people's thoughts. One day, probably early in her career, Saka tested Fiida. He ordered the bearers of the carry oracle to a secluded spot at the village's edge. There, out of Fiida's sight and earshot, Gaan

Tata was consulted about current events. Fiida, without having gone into trance, was able to tell the assembled elders at the village square exactly what message the priests were receiving from the deity through the oracle. None of these elders had been present when the divination at the forest's edge took place. All were therefore astounded when they later heard Saka's report about the divination, and realized how closely it corresponded with Fiida's rendering of the discussion.

The fact that she knew the deity's opinion about significant events changed her position vis-à-vis the priests. Prior to Fiida's arrival, Gaan Tata's judgment about current affairs had been obtained by consulting the oracle, which required the services of a number of deputy priests. Saka was increasingly inclined to consider this process unnecessarily cumbersome and time-consuming. He explained to his followers that he could just as well, and with considerably less effort, ask Fiida what the divine pronouncement on any issue would be. Her possessing spirit, being Gaan Tata's companion, could speak on all such matters with sufficient clarity and authority. Astonishingly, this proposal was accepted. So for a number of years, utterances by Fiida's spirit (Da Amoitee) were considered equal to Gaan Tata's pronouncements. During her prime, Fiida and the old High Priest Saka reigned as the spiritual leaders of Ndyuka society.

Fiida's reputation as a healer and a singer attracted many young women seeking the honor of serving as her supporting vocalists—she had never given up her singing career—and as maidservants. If they were good-looking and could sing well, the girls received an invitation to join Fiida's retinue. The maidservants took care of all domestic chores. Fiida was not expected to do any work in her gardens; that job, too, was the responsibility of the maids, assisted by other "volunteers." This last category consisted mainly of patients who had been given to understand that such labor was considered part of their fee. The maidservants drew water for Fiida, emptied chamber pots, swept her houses, and did all the cooking. During ceremonies they would place pieces of cloth before their mistress so that she need not dirty her feet. Her maids-in-waiting helped Fiida dress like a fashionable Creole lady from Paramaribo.

In return for food and other remunerations, but above all for the privilege of being in the limelight, the girls performed these and other services with dedication. One of the services demanded by Fiida's spirit, that two girls sleep with his medium each night, later became the object of much controversy. Fiida had specified pointedly that her tutelary spirit was male, and that he insisted on sharing the pleasures of life with her. Interpretations about what happened during these nightly séances still vary widely. Two historians, from Bilo villages, insisted to us that the girls really slept with a man, not a woman: "You wouldn't believe it, but the girls felt a male organ penetrate them,"

they asserted.⁹ Others, from Gaanboli and Diitabiki, held more cynical views of what actually took place: probably their sources (parents and other relatives who lived in that age) were closer to the scene when the scandal broke. These commentators insisted that it was not a spirit but Fiida herself who had such lustful cravings. Her detractors claimed that she penetrated the girls with a little stick in the shape of a maize cob. "Who has ever heard of a spirit making love?" these cynics asked. During the years when Fiida's star was shining brightly, the girls were enthralled. They publicly boasted about the prowess of the Amoitee spirit. Ordinary lovemaking was compared to this form of spiritual congress, and found lacking. The pleasures their erstwhile lovers had offered—entering Fiida's service required girls to sever ties with boyfriends, for Amoitee was believed to be a jealous spirit—paled in comparison to the raptures brought by intimate contact with an indefatigable spirit.

Fiida apparently remained in command of day-to-day operations at Gaan Tata's Gaanboli shrines for many years. Regularly, about once every year, Fiida, accompanied by the High Priest Saka, would journey to other villages on a "state visit." During those solemn occasions she would present the honored villages with (often quite arbitrary) dictates, presumably to display her power. According to several accounts, on a number of occasions she ordered all cooking fires in a village to be extinguished. No one dared to stand up to her during those years.

Fiida is not mentioned in any published material that we know of. A few entries in Spalburg's diaries, kept at Diitabiki from 1896–1900, probably refer to her. In August 1899, for example, Spalburg wrote: "On Monday, Oseyse sent me a message that Captain Labi [Labi Agumasaka, or Saka for short] had arrived. How different an appearance life now has taken! Immediately upon arrival, all those girls traveling with him were possessed by spirits, yelling day and night" (Spalburg 1979:60). This passage clearly demonstrates that even the early Gaan Tata cult—after a lapse of a few years—was again clearly associated with spirit mediumship. During the purge of the early 1890s at Puketi, only Kumanti spirit mediums had been left untouched. But the women "yelling day and night" were not seized by Kumanti spirits—very few women ever are—but by a new category of spirits introduced by Fiida: the Amoitee and his Gaan Gadu wenti. Very likely Fiida was among those who disturbed Spalburg's sleep. Another entry in Spalburg's diary may also be linked to her. In June 1899, Spalburg (1979:76–77) mentioned the presence at Diitabiki of an "obeah woman" who had been called from Gaanboli to cure a patient. A problem arose when a woman from Diitabiki had stolen some rice belonging to this "obeah woman." This, as Spalburg explains, was considered unforgivable because the rice, in fact, belonged to a sacred being. The thief was caught, and at the request of Gaanman Oseyse condemned to the most humiliating of pun-

ishments: a public flogging. While she was being whipped she managed to escape with the help of some onlookers, a fairly routine end to most "severe punishments." The "obeah woman" is never mentioned by name, but there can be little doubt that the "sacred being" hailing from Gaanboli was Fiida. No other woman living at that time would have been considered a "sacred being"; no one else would have prompted Gaanman Oseyse to intervene and demand the severest of punishments.

But then, after years of intimate cooperation, Saka and Fiida fell out. As usual with incidents that have been recorded only in the minds of contemporaries and then passed on in oral accounts, dates are not available and different versions of the collision exist. In one version, Fiida fell from grace when Saka discovered she was leaking classified information about the Da Lebi Koosi obiya to Gaanman Oseyse. More specifically, she was blamed for providing Oseyse with detailed information on how to construct a second Gaan Tata obiya—and how to find the necessary materials at Saantigoon. When Oseyse launched his own Gaan Tata oracle in the opening years of last century, Saka first belittled the undertaking; then he predicted that divine displeasure would soon become apparent through famines and epidemics (van Lier 1919:48). When none of these calamities occurred, Saka started looking for culprits. Several followers came under suspicion for "leaking."¹⁰ Saka finally settled on Fiida as the real enemy within the gates. Her Amoitee spirit was exorcized and she was ousted from her privileged position at Saka's court.

In another version, Saka's anger was aroused when details about the nature of the nightly revels between Fiida and her maidens transpired. Exactly what Saka's objections were is difficult to know for certain. Lesbianism, of frequent occurrence among Creole women at the turn of the century, was frowned upon in Ndyuka culture but tolerated if it occurred only infrequently. Impersonating a man incited more criticism. It was considered natural as long as there was no doubt about her spirit seizures, but abhorrent once people began to consider that possession fraudulent. One of Saka's foster sons claimed that he had heard Saka give vent to his disgust at Fiida's inclinations: "She was born a woman, then she begins behaving like a man! Revolting!"¹¹

After her death, Fiida was condemned as a *misi dede* (a sinner). During the inquest, it was reported that the rough and reckless way in which Fiida had treated her girls in bed, and the fact that she had forced them to submit against their will, had galled Gaan Tata extremely. Therefore the verdict of the gravediggers was that their deity had removed her from the living. The communiqué formulated after the inquest must have contained very little of this: the news spread within the narrow circle of Saka's following and within the Gaanman's lineage. It never seems to have reached the prominent elders of Bilo villages. One does not wash one's dirty linen in public.¹²

When discussing Fiida's career, all Ndyuka historians stress her importance to the Gaan Tata movement during its formative years. They assert that Fiida was just as crucial to Gaanboli's status as a religious center as Saka's contribution was. They also agree that she had fallen from grace a few years before her death (ca. 1910). The exorcism of her Amoitee gadu by Saka robbed her of any chance to speak with authority in the tribal councils. It also meant she could no longer continue her work as a healer. With a single blow her prestige and emoluments were lost. Work at the twin oracles of Gaanboli and Diitabiki returned to normal. The age of innovation and charismatic interference with divination had come to an end. Years of normalcy, standard procedures in divination, and almost bureaucratic routines were to replace them. In the future, revolutionary innovations would spring from other sources.

Fiida's lasting contribution was the creation of a new pantheon of spirits called Gaan Gadu wenti or, in proper Ndyukatongo: Gaan Gadu gadu (deputy spirits of Da Amoitee that were allowed to remain with the Ndyuka after Amoitee himself had to go). They were considered to be of lesser stature than Amoitee but to have originated from the same divine source, and they remained intimately linked with Gaan Tata. These gadu seized scores of females. This form of spirit possession posed no threat to the Gaan Tata priesthood, for the priests could either acknowledge individuals claiming to be mediums of such deities or withhold any such recognition. At any rate, the utterances of minor deities could (by theological definition) contradict neither the result of Gaan Tata divination nor the pronouncements of Ma Fiida, at least not when her star was still shining brightly. During those years, both the oracle and Fiida were viewed as the principal spokespersons for the godhead; any other emissaries were subsidiary to them. In the early 1960s, we still witnessed a few cases of possession by Gaan Gadu wenti.

FRESH PROBLEMS

We know much more about what happened after the founding of the Gaan Tata cult, because from this point forward we are no longer solely dependent on oral history. Published and archival material covers the better part of the second stage in the movement's history.

As soon as the Tapanahoni Ndyuka had accepted Saka's Gaan Tata oracle as the legitimate spokesman for a deity without equals—because it was sent directly by Masaa Gadu, the Creator God—they decided to export the cult to other Ndyuka areas, and to other Maroons as well. The Ndyuka saw the new creed as absolutely essential to the survival of all Maroons, not as something of mere parochial or tribal significance. But new problems soon arose.

Whatever the iconoclastic purges may have removed, it was certainly not the fear of witchcraft. In 1899, Spalburg, who had lived in Diitabiki for a couple of years, noted in his diaries: "It is hardly possible these days to discuss the true religion with these people; all their conversations turn to one subject only: witch finding. Poor soul whom they are after! Every cold, fever or other illness is attributed to witchcraft" (1979:78). And again in 1899: "... many suffer from intestinal disorders. . . . This strengthens Gaanman and his medicine men's conviction that there must be a witch at work in Diitabiki. . . . One day, when a boat arrived, a woman jumped out of it and started singing: 'Witches are on the loose in Gaanman's own village; God has sent me to warn you!'" (Spalburg 1979:81).

We have no figures about the number of deceased who were condemned as witches during the 1890s. But several sources stress that the number of posthumous condemnations was high, right from the



Figure 12 Saka's faakatiki (prayer pole) and Gaan Tata's first temple (Diitabiki, 1962).

beginning of the new cult. These historians told us that only a few years after Coba's death the witches' cemetery at Saantigoon was becoming a crowded place. People in villages near Saantigoon complained about the disturbance of their sleep from the constant bickering among the shades of witches. Although Coba's ghost was singled out as one particularly loud and argumentative speaker, it was still only one among many. The villages of Puketi and Moitaki (closest to Saantigoon) sent a delegation to Gaanman Oseyse with the request that he help them find a way to stop the racket. To ameliorate conditions, Oseyse ordered each clan to select and prepare its own "cemetery" for witches. This seems to have brought some solace, at least oral accounts emphasize that after this measure had been implemented, no more such complaints were lodged with Gaan Tata's priests. This can be seen as indirect corroboration of statements by some Ndyuka about the great amount of work that Gaan Tata's priests had to perform because of the epidemic of witchcraft during Chief Oseyse's reign (1884–1915).

A few years after Coba puu sani, a similar event occurred in the Bilo village of Keementi. A man called Aguda, who had long suffered from venereal diseases, finally died. When the gravediggers were carrying his corpse, they came to the conclusion that Aguda, out of sheer spite and envy, had planned to kill men more successful than he. The oloman were ready to haul his corpse away to be abandoned in the jungle when Aguda's ghost suddenly addressed a few farewell words to his village. To be hastily gotten rid of was certainly what he deserved, the ghost acknowledged, but people should remember that if they did, they would also be burying what he knew about all the dirty conspiracies he was involved in.

Saka, having learned his lesson, railed in bitter opposition, but the people of Keementi proceeded full speed. It became the Coba investigations all over again. Hundreds of individuals were summoned to pass under the bier with Aguda's corpse on it. This series of purges became known as *Da Aguda puu sani* ("Father Aguda removes [evil] things"). They never achieved the status of the earlier Coba inquiries, because Saka's antagonism caused *Da Aguda puu sani* to be defined as having merely local significance. Local or not, every Bilo village took part in it.

There were other setbacks for Saka's new cult. One of its novel features was the institution of *gadu lai* (god's cargoes). Boatloads of the possessions of persons Gaan Tata was believed to have killed were brought to Diitabiki for ritual cleansing and then confiscated by the oracle's priests. Only a smattering of items from these estates ever found their way back to their proper inheritors. Opposition therefore began to focus on the men who stood to gain most from this involuntary redistribution system: the priests and their families. Of the fourteen Ndyuka clans, only two, the Otoo and the Misidyan, and within these

only a few matrilineages, could lay claim to the spoils. This inequality did not constitute an issue in the euphoric first years, but it grew into a major bone of contention in a later phase. The gadu lai was widely resented, but some 70 years later we found it still very much alive.

Notes

- ¹ A number of minor carry oracles existed in the Tapanahoni region before 1890. Brunetti (1890:207) saw one in operation in the village of Malobi in 1886. None of them ever achieved national recognition.
- ² The two Gaanboli historians, Amatali and Amoikudu, were most explicit about this sequence of events. Their accounts were factual, detailed, and contained many statements that we checked against those of others. None of the elements of this “traumatic journey” was ever seriously challenged. In April 1978, we visited Godoolo to check the assertion that Saka had visited all three Godoolo villages (Saniki, Fisiti, and Pikin Kondee) to probe the extent of support for the Coba investigations. The information we gathered at Godoolo endorsed the view of the Gaanboli historians. Saka had stopped at all three main boat landings, spoken to several (named) elders including da Anono, and sought in vain to persuade them to disregard Puketi’s injunctions.
- ³ This account of how an obiya accepts its new custodians is a fairly routine one. To remove doubts, the punishment is most severe for the person who stands to profit most.
- ⁴ Da Amatali and da Amoikudu of Gaanboli were interviewed on separate occasions. Their testimony was almost identical.
- ⁵ Da Asawooko remembering his mother’s words, April 1979.
- ⁶ At that time, Saka himself preferred the names Gaan Gadu or Tata Ede.
- ⁷ On several occasions, we have asked ourselves whether we were perhaps exaggerating the significance of the Puketi Inquiries. During March and April of 1978, a gaan kuutu was held at Puketi to curb the power of prophet Akalali, leader of the Ogii (Danger) movement (see chapter 14). Commented Da Asawooko, one of the best of the Misidyan historians: “This meeting is important to us today, but Coba puu sani was of even greater significance for our grandfathers and grandmothers.” Most contemporaries, whether Ndyuka or Europeans, would have agreed. The missionaries (Kersten 1896:185; Schaerf 1892:520–1; Schneider 1893:63; Spalburg 1979:33) were fully convinced that an upheaval of the old order had taken place, but they had little idea about its cause or about the direction this religious revolution was likely to take. Indirect corroboration of the Puketi Inquiries’ significance comes from Akalali, the religious leader of the 1970s. When asked about Coba’s death and its aftermath, Akalali claimed that “his” deity (Ogii) rather than Sweli “mounted” Coba. This clearly indicates that clans such as the Pataa and Pinasi, the main supporters of the Ogii cult, saw the occasion as important enough to lay claim to a crucial role for their own clan deity. In his history of his own people, the Ndyuka herbalist and historian André Pakosie (1999:54–57) comes to the same conclusion. He also confirms our account of the legitimation of the new Gaan Tata obiya after consulting with different Ndyuka historians from the ones with whom we spoke.
- ⁸ At that time Gaan Gadu seems to have been the preferred name. During the 1960s it was Bigi Gadu. But Gaan Tata always remained a respected synonym. People from both Gaanboli and Diitabiki would use both names. But only the Gaanboli deity had a special name, and it still has it today: Da Lebi Koosi.
- ⁹ Da Mato and Da Pantea of Benanu and Tabiki villages respectively.
- ¹⁰ One Bilo historian, Da Mato (Benanu village) expressed himself very clearly on the subject: “It was Fiida who leaked classified information to Oseyse and that brought about her downfall!”

The Abominable Institution

7

THE CLEANSING OF WITCHCRAFT

The events at Coba's death were both ordinary and extraordinary. For most of Ndyuka history, it was highly unusual that a corpse would be carried around for questioning for days and weeks. We have never seen it happen, and historical accounts tell us about only two cases. But the other aspects of ghost interrogation, both in its practices and beliefs, form part and parcel of Ndyuka culture.

The chief purpose of the inquest is to ascertain the supernatural cause of death. Ndyuka recognize two main possibilities: "killed by god" (gadu dede), a verdict implying evil causes, and "taken away by the ancestors" (Yooka dede). The category "killed by god" is further subdivided into "a witch's death" (wisi dede) and "a sinner's death" (misi dede). All "killed by god" spirits are posthumously punished by denying the relatives the right to bury the corpse properly: "sinners" find a shallow grave and "witches" are left in an unholy part of the forest, covered only by a few branches. During the early 1960s, two out of every three deceased were judged to have been "killed by god." Within that category, "sinners" and witches" equaled one another.

When the corpses of sinners and witches are disposed of, there still remains the problem of their possessions. Survivors must guard against any contact with their dead relative's tainted material goods. These are considered a threat to the health and moral integrity of descendants. Like a slow-working poison, the residue of wisi can sap



Figure 13 “Taken away by the ancestors”—the burial of a Gaanboli Captain (Diitabiki, 1978).

and undermine the strength of the living long after the demise of the objects' former owners. For this reason (the priests piously proclaim), the relatives need to be relieved of their dangerous legacy. Gaan Tata's priests therefore helpfully confiscate the inheritance in the name of their deity, and decontaminate it during purification rites called *kiin kondee* (to cleanse the village or land) or *seeka kondee* (to restore normalcy in the land). After this decontamination, it is left to divine (or priestly) discretion to determine which part of the gadu lai will be returned to the deceased's relatives.

These cleansing rites had important political consequences for Ndyuka society. First of all, Diitabiki's Gaan Tata's priests held a monopoly over these rites for all Tapanahoni villages.¹ Gaan Tata's priests of the Cottica region held the same rights, but their colleagues of the Sara Creek region were not allowed to perform them. Leerdam (1957) mentions the cumbersome transport of the god's cargoes from the Sara Creek to the Coast and then up the Marowijne to the Tapanahoni, for there is no direct connection between Sara Creek and Tapanahoni. Whether Leerdam himself actually witnessed these expeditions is not clear, but he did record particulars about the large size of some of these cargoes.

The purification ceremonies were held about once every three months. During 1961 and 1962, the priests processed a total of 35 inheritances, brought to Diitabiki from virtually every Tapanahoni village.

Depending upon the number of the gadu lai involved, there might be from 50 to 150 accompanying relatives spending a week in Diitabiki. Each delegation would typically include among its dignitaries the village Captain and his assistants, and as many of his subjects as he could arrange to bring along. Most young men and women saw the ritual as a welcome opportunity to show off their best clothes, as an excuse to party.

BRINGING IN THE CARGOES

When a death occurred, the Captain immediately reported it to the Gaanman in Diitabiki. This dede mofu (death message) provided information about the nature of the demise, whether the deceased was gadu dede (killed by god) or yooka dede (taken away by the ancestors). The messenger bringing the "death message" to the Gaanman would leave instantly. Relatives of the deceased would hurry to the house of the deceased and start lamenting and crying. In the meantime, the gravediggers fashioned a makeshift litter to place the body of the deceased on. Seldom would more than an hour elapse between the beginning of wailing by the bereaved and the start of corpse divination.

When the obligatory inquest with its carrying of the corpse pointed to a wrathful action by Gaan Tata, most Captains would hurriedly inform Diitabiki's priests with a second death message. In this way, Diitabiki's priests were kept informed about villages that were burdened by contaminated goods. Once a threshold number of such deaths had accumulated, they would announce the date for their cleansing rites.

The priests usually phrased their orders to the bereaved as an act of kindness: "On such-and-such a day we are willing to relieve you of this dangerous legacy. Although hard-pressed for time, we shall give this sad duty our priority." At Diitabiki's oracle we have overheard priests make remarks such as: "They [the bereaved] ought to be grateful that Diitabiki does the dirty work for them." While there must have been instances of people being pleased that a supernatural threat was removed from their village, it remains doubtful that all those on whom such favors were bestowed shared these sentiments. By the 1960s, it was obvious that not all Ndyuka felt gratitude for this service and that many bereaved deeply resented having to surrender their dead kin's property to the priests.

Diary, September 1962

On the first day of the cleansing rites, when boats loaded with god's cargoes arrived at Diitabiki's boat landings, Gaan Tata's carry oracle was positioned on the waterfront. The Captains of the stricken villages congregated around the oracle and its priests. After the arrival of the families involved, one of the priests sprin-



Figure 14 Carrying God's cargo to the house of the great ancestors. Note the planks the people are carrying and the enormous faakatiki; it is the national prayer pole (Diitabiki, 1962).

kled the contaminated possessions with consecrated beer and rum. A crowd from Diitabiki and surrounding villages watched the unloading of the gadu lai with great interest.

When the First Priest [the second-in-command at the oracle] began ringing a bell, the kinsmen of the deceased formed a single line and started carrying the goods into the village to the *gaanwan osu*, [house of the great or illustrious dead], a shrine for Gaan Tata's departed servitors. Each of the women—men seldom take part in this procession—carried only one or two objects, minimizing the possibility that anything might be dropped, which would have been a serious breach of taboo. We noted all sorts of objects in the procession: rusty boxes used for clothes, wooden seating stools, cooking and other household utensils, shotguns, but also old planks, a crate with empty soda pop bottles, and a bunch of bananas.

Outside the *gaanwan osu*, the goods were handed over to deputy priests and to a few volunteers from Diitabiki who assisted in stacking the merchandise in the shrine. The women then returned to the boats for more. Meanwhile the highest ranking priests were still grouped around the carry oracle on the waterfront. The First Priest, relieved at intervals by one of his colleagues, continued to ring the hand bell until one entire estate had been transferred from the boats to the *gaanwan osu*. The same procedure was followed for each subsequent consignment. The High Priest, Akontu Velanti, watched the proceedings from the veranda of his official residence. The occasion resembled an eve-of-the-auction viewing day. The mood was festive; we could detect no trace of gloom. When every cargo had reached its destination, the *Gaanwan Osu* was "sealed" by surrounding it with the long-stemmed leaves of *singaafu* [*Costus speciosus zingiberaceae*] to form a magical circle of protection. The oracle was then carried around the shrine, three times, to invest the magic circle with even more supernatural power.

THE DIVINE AUCTION

On the following days the *luku lai* (inspection of the cargoes) took place. As usual, hundreds of people had flocked to Diitabiki's ritual center to watch the events. At a sign from the High Priest, the women of one of the concerned kin groups started bringing the first cargo from the house of the great dead to the assembled elders and priests. Each item in turn was held up for display. Elders from Diitabiki and neighboring villages sat in a wide circle around the pile of goods accumulating in the middle of the square near Gaan Tata's carry oracle.

The High Priest then addressed the elders through his *pikiman* (speaker), who is always present at important gatherings. On this occasion, as he would do on many others, Akontu Velanti pointed out that he was charged with a difficult and thankless task that in view of his many other obligations, left him little spare time. He asked the audience the rhetorical question: "Am I not fully occupied with helping the patients

who stream to this village from all directions in search of a cure?" Assenting murmurs followed. Other priests added: "There now, well said! We are overburdened with work. We cannot even get to our gardens any more!" Akontu continued by adding that he was holding this ritual only because lanti had repeatedly requested him to do so. (Lanti is the "third party," consisting of Captains and elders not directly involved in an event, those whose villages did not have to bring god cargoes.) "As Gaanman," he concluded, "I can never ignore the pleas of my people."

As was customary at all palavers, the Captains and elders of the stricken villages, and the lanti group, requested and were granted permission to withdraw for a few minutes to a spot out of earshot where they could agree on a united response. On their return, one Captain stepped forward to speak on the group's behalf. He thanked the Gaanman "and his god" most effusively for being willing to invest their precious time in this arduous duty. (For an outsider, it is difficult to tell whether people actually believe that the priests are doing them a service by impounding their inheritances. But there is little doubt that many are aware that Diitabiki's priests are very good at looking after their own interests.)

2. With the preliminaries completed, the ritual could start in earnest. Akontu asked his deputies whose gadu lai was on display and learned that these were the possessions of Melina, who had been a fifteen-year-old girl. Melina's effects consisted of a single box of clothing, and some domestic wares including cooking utensils. The First Priest took a bottle of beer and sprinkled it over the girl's possessions, asking a number of elders from Diitabiki to step forward and assist in the distribution of the girl's possessions. The invited elders put their stools in the middle of the circle and opened Melina's box. They held up the garments one by one while watching the carry oracle. If they received a negative gesture from its bearers, the article was put back in the box, for return to the girl's next of kin. An affirmative reaction signified that the deity claimed the article concerned. One of the elders would then hand it to the First Priest, thereby signaling that it was confiscated. Once they had gone through everything in Melina's box, the First Priest divided the few remaining objects into two piles: one for the deity and one for Melina's relatives. On the latter we noted a paddle, a stool, a wooden plate, and a few pans.

Larger cargoes required a different procedure. One of the priests would simply draw a dividing line through the middle of the heap of materials while waiting for a hint, from the High Priest or one of his colleagues, to shift a few objects from one side of the line to the other. When those in command seemed satisfied, the priests signaled to the deceased's kinsmen to take home their part of the cargo, while some women sitting under the overhangs of nearby houses were asked to return the remaining goods to the house of the great dead.

On the face of it, there seemed to be a fairly equal distribution, but sometimes the scales would clearly tip in favor of the deity. On this particular day, for example, two shotguns, a beautiful beaten copper kettle, a set of new pans, and a brand-new game bag were all put on the deity's pile. All rum and other liquor was immediately confiscated by the priests. The deity's portion also included some junk, such as empty bottles and broken tools. Houses and gardens belonging to those "killed by god" were shared by the deceased's relatives just as would happen with any other inheritance. It was considered good manners, however, to give the High Priest some symbolic part of the produce from these gardens. A can of cassava meal, for example, would be considered appropriate. But the fruit trees of witches and sinners from Diitabiki itself would be confiscated by the priests.

On that same day, the oracle's staff handled two gadu lai from the village of Moitaki. The result of the corpse interrogation had been contested. The gravediggers from Moitaki and surrounding villages, perhaps acting under local pressure, had concluded that these two were neither witches nor sinners. Consequently, their estates had been divided among their relatives as if the dead belonged to the category "taken away by the ancestors." However, a few days later the Gaan Tata oracle voiced a quite different opinion: the deity asserted that both of these deceased had been witches and that he had therefore killed them. With the verdict of the corpse interrogation reversed by the highest court, Moitaki's elders were forced to collect everything that had been distributed among the bereaved and transport it at once to Diitabiki.

When these goods were put before the deity, the bearers of the carry oracle moved out of earshot, leaving the consultation between priests and oracle visible but not audible. Gaanman Akontu was called away from the public meeting to take part in the deliberations. After about ten minutes, everyone resumed their places, and the first priest reported their findings: "Gaan Tata feels gratified at the obedience shown by the people of Moitaki. However, because it is distressing to impound things that already found new owners, Gaan Tata will not keep this gadu lai from the people of Moitaki." High Priest Akontu responded to this with a speech that mixed frankness and hypocrisy:

If Gaan Tata tells you that the gadu lai should be given back to the people, there is nothing we priests can do about it. I recall one day when a big cargo arrived at our waterfront. Four boats couldn't carry all those goods. Imagine how I felt when Gaan Tata told me that he had nothing to do with the owner of all this wealth! The family made off with it, while I had been hoping for a rich haul!

The third phase of the purification rituals involved the ceremonial delivery of the god's cargoes to the sacred shrine at Saantigoon. That

place, some ten kilometers downstream from Diitabiki, was out of bounds to all Bakaa (Outsiders); both the ritual and the site itself were shrouded in secrecy. Many Ndyuka told us they had never visited the place. This is a part of their religion that Ndyuka intend to keep concealed from the outside world. We observed the departure of Gaan Tata priests from Diitabiki to Saantigoon, but it would not have been appreciated had we tried to follow them. It was a subject that we could only broach with a few persons we knew intimately. Not until many years later, after a rebel prophet desecrated it, were we able to piece together what happened at the forest shrine.

Early in the morning the priests and the deceased's relatives assembled at one of Diitabiki's boat landings, where they were joined by a few invited dignitaries in gaily decorated boats. Together they would sail for Saantigoon. Nobody was allowed to work their gardens that day; one either participated in the ritual or stayed put in the village.

From a place opposite Moitaki where the boats were moored, a wide and well-maintained path called *gadu pasi* (god's road) led straight to Gaan Tata's forest shrine. To the singing of *tuka* (funerary hymns), the *gadu lai* were carried to the holy place less than a mile from the river. Only a few priests and trusted elders would be in attendance; most of the uninvited, having little desire to be thought greedy or nosey, would not even contemplate visiting Saantigoon on such an occasion. What followed was a repeat of what happened at the divine auction in the village: while the faithful waited in the clearing that served as an antechamber, a second distribution took place. The most valuable objects would be displayed, one by one, for the deity's inspection. Gaan Tata's carry oracle would then indicate whether the new owner of that object would be a priest or the god himself. In 1962 we wrote: "From what people tell us, we understand that the best portions of the cargo are reserved for the priests and ferried back to Diitabiki. Gaan Tata is reputed to reserve for himself only worthless and unusable objects. These are left at the forest shrine." Later, when we had a chance to visit the sanctum ourselves, we realized we were wrong. It appeared that many valuable objects had been left in the forest to honor Gaan Tata (see p. 135).

On the trip back from Saantigoon to Diitabiki, people acted out their relief with more exuberant behavior than on the outward journey. Those who had *gwa gadu* (gone to the deity), as this pilgrimage was termed, might indulge in some licentious horseplay with members of the opposite sex.² On their return to Diitabiki all participants proceeded to the center of the village where the house of the great dead and the national ancestor shrine are situated. The priests sprinkled the entire gathering, often numbering more than a hundred persons, with consecrated beer. After this, Gaan Tata's sacred bundle was carried around them, three times. Finally, Gaanman Akontu would step

forward to exhort: "Let none of you people ever perpetrate the crimes of witchcraft; all of you have now seen how Gaan Tata settles accounts with criminals of this type."

LAST DAYS OF THE OLD ORDER

In those early days in the 1960s, we never succeeded in getting invited to join the expedition to the sacred forest shrine. We were also kept away from the actual division of goods ferried back to Diitabiki and surrendered to the deity's servitors. But in 1970 we were fortunate enough to be present when the remainder of a gadu lai was split. Such rituals were then supervised by a new High Priest (Akontu had died in 1964) by the name of Amelikan. On that particular occasion there was only one god's cargo. The journey to Saantigoon had been completed, and people were in Diitabiki for the final division of the estate. Amelikan was very much in charge. He ordered his priests to pick up objects and hand them to the beneficiaries. First, he sent one of his deputy priests to the new Gaanman, Gazon (term of office 1966–present), with two pieces of cloth and one big enamel cooking pan. Next, both Amelikan's sister and his mother's sister were given a few pans and kettles. His favorite front bearer was presented with three pieces of cloth and one kettle. Another front bearer, who had fallen in disfavor, was passed over: he was sent home with a sieve. "For your wife," the High Priest emphasized. Amelikan selected some pangi and a few calabashes for another functionary of the oracle and for a male relative of his. Then he called one of his children, a girl of three, to take whatever she liked and carry it home to her mother. Finally, he ordered the First Priest to lift a box, still half filled with clothing, and bring it to his—the High Priest's—house, presumably to be shared between the two of them. The priests profited most, with the High Priest getting the lion's share. The Gaanman, who belongs to the same matrilineage, also gained. Passed over were any members of other Diitabiki lineages, and the elders from neighboring villages, even though they had participated in the ritual.

The distribution took place in front of one of Gaan Tata's temples (the size of a large hut) with only the priests in attendance. Passers-by, except for an inquisitive anthropologist, gave it a wide berth. The anthropologist was later upbraided by the High Priest. "Some people are not aware of any limit on gathering knowledge. One should always know how far one can go," Amelikan lectured.

We already knew in those days that the gadu lai, the god's cargoes, were a hateful institution in the eyes of many Ndyuka. Amelikan used the ritual for personal gain without even a pretense at altruism. The High Priest never doubted that his lineage, and his family especially, had every right to most other people's confiscated estates. However, to

the Ndyuka themselves, caught up in the action as they were, this was not so obvious. In 1970, few would have guessed that an insurrection was at hand. Yet during those very days, a man named Akalali was preparing himself in a nearby village for the overthrow of the Gaan Tata cult. We did not know it then, but we were witness to the last days of the Great Father cult on the Tapanahoni.

Notes

¹ The Gaan Tata priests at Gaanboli were not allowed to perform those rites.

² This was also accepted practice on the annual *corvée* (obligatory unpaid servitude) wherein a couple of villages, following a rotating schedule, would prepare new gardens for the Gaanman. Young men and women embraced each other warmly on such occasions, and a few older people seemed happy to join them. The ultimate joke was either to rip off somebody's clothes, or to make a feint at each other's genitals. Married men and women tended to frown on such practices and attempted to dissuade their partners from taking part in such a sacred *corvée*.

A Divine Disciplinarian

The history of the early Gaan Tata cult was our subject in chapters 5 and 6. How an oracle works, the functionaries who are involved, and the tasks they perform, have been discussed in chapters 4 and 7. Naturally notions basic to the Gaan Tata cult were mentioned and briefly discussed. What has been neglected so far is the social imagery¹ that is specific to the Gaan Tata regime. Such imagery rests on the stories people weave from the religious notions they have imbibed and the practices in which they participate. In brief, we focus here on the workings of the imagination, not as a purely individual mental process, but as something that is shared, whether directly in a palaver or, more likely, in the seclusion of a house, intuited more often than openly exchanged. Our view of a social imagery comes close to a concept Burridge (1995) used when analyzing Melanesian cargo-cults, that of the myth-dream or community day-dream. He explains that this is “a body of notions derived from a variety of sources such as rumors, personal experiences, desires, conflicts, and ideas about the total environment, which finds expression in myths, dreams, popular stories and anecdotes” (1995:27). Such shared imaginations will eventually surface and give a distinct profile to the religious regime in question. These social imageries owe whatever structure they have to a few dominant concepts that overshadow all others.² As Ndyuka myths evidence, the key assumptions basic to Gaan Tata’s social imagery are the deity’s alien nature and his punitive, vindictive, and almost criminal qualities.

AN ALIEN PRESENCE

Gaan Tata, the Great Father, is of African provenance, but when they recount the myths of the early period, Ndyuka historians invariably speak of Sweli Gadu, not of Gaan Tata or Gaan Gadu. This usage reflects the fact that the nineteenth Gaan Tata cult developed out of the eighteenth century Sweli Gadu cult. When Africans were enslaved and transported to Suriname, Sweli Gadu kept them company in the holds of slave ships. When they toiled and suffered on the plantations, he was their witness. Eventually he helped them escape into the interior but he, the deity, always remained a stranger to the South American forest. This story is primarily embodied in myth, but the theme will also crop up in daily conversations. Over the course of a dozen stints of fieldwork, countless Ndyuka have emphasized Gaan Tata's foreign extraction to us. Many stressed that Gaan Tata lived with the slaves on the plantations, often adding that he had been an African god before those years of bondage. In contrast, the deity Ogii, whom we mentioned in the third chapter, has resided in the Surinamese forest since time immemorial. This is what André Pakosie, Ogii's last medium and a specialist on Ampuku lore, told us about the *lonten*, the time of the great escape, of "running away."

Grandmother's Obiya

From the sources of the Commewijne River, our ancestors walked for seven days. Then one of our grandmothers folded her skirt into a small bundle and tied it to a rope. The movements of the bundle told our ancestors where to go. *Sweli Gadu ben de logologo anga a mama* [Sweli Gadu really took possession of this grandmother of ours]. And that is how our ancestors found the River [the Tapanahoni]. Other people didn't have these skills; they had to accept our leadership.

Sweli Gadu Helpless

When Sweli Gadu arrived at the [Tapanahoni] River, he felt lonely. All the spirits he encountered were strange to him. He put his complaints before Ogii, the Forest King. Ogii took pity on him and said: "I will give you some of my followers." So Ogii sent him a number of Ampuku [bush spirits] who all carried the same name: *Kofi Anado fu Gainsa*. Sweli Gadu was jubilant: he was no longer alone in the forest. He brainwashed³ the spirits so that they would forget their former loyalties and listen only to him, Sweli Gadu. Nowadays these Kofi Anado spirits are no longer in contact with other Ampuku; they consider themselves Sweli Gadu's retainer spirits.

Gaan Tata as a Caucasian

In 1895, Samuel Bauch, a missionary stationed on the Cottica River, described the new deity that Ndyuka emissaries had brought from the Tapanahoni to the Cottica. "They call him, for example, Sir

Jehovah, or the Lord God. They even call him Bakra (European). In these ways hostile Captains and medicine men try to make the people believe that Gaan Tata is the same God as the one that is worshiped in the Bible" (MTB 1895:52).

Ordinarily, the term Bakra, or Bakaa in the Ndyuka language, refers to the concept of "Foreigner" or "Outsider," someone who is neither Maroon nor Amerindian. Here, however, it clearly referred to the more specific category of "European." When we originally came across this entry in the missionary's journal we were inclined to dismiss it. Why would a deity who had waged war on the whites carry such a name? But later events made us reconsider. In 1978, while navigating our canoe (a dugout with outboard motor) through the rapids near Gaan Tata's sanctuary at Saantigoon, our Ndyuka pilot and boatman, who was a Gaan Tata priest, exclaimed: "Did you see him there, standing on the shore? That's our God!" We had not watched the forest's edge. "What does he look like?" we asked. The answer surprised us: "He looks like you, Bonno. He is a white man, but taller than you." That the deity, when he assumes a visible shape, could appear to Ndyuka as a white man had been already mentioned to us, but until that moment people had only alluded to it in the privacy of their homes.

Various elements in these myths demonstrate Sweli Gadu's or Gaan Tata's alienness to Suriname's interior. He accompanied the slaves as they crossed the ocean; he helped them escape from bondage, and although he proved a good guide in bringing them as far as the Tapanahoni, that was also where his expertise ended. From there on he was dependent on the forest deities, especially on Ogii, their ruler. Certainly, Gaan Tata brought his own supernatural assets, and with these obiya he helped the Ndyuka defeat their enemies. But he could not save them from diseases indigenous to this unfamiliar forest. The fact that in one of his incarnations he was portrayed as a white man might mean that he knew the secrets of the Europeans, that he possessed inside knowledge of their motives and strategies. One should also see this in opposition to his great rival, Ogii. When Ogii assumes a human shape, he takes on the appearance of an Amerindian who is seen by Ndyuka as a child of nature, someone who is at home in the South American rain forest, as they (in their own minds) are not.

CROOKED BEGINNINGS

In trying to understand the deity's punitive nature, we looked at the various myths and discovered that they formed a palimpsest: behind the overt story—that of a dangerous, stern deity—another text shines through. We learned about treachery, and about revenge that overshot its aim. We also heard about the founders of the cult whose lives ended with betrayal and tragedy.

The story begins, innocuously enough, with the most famous of Ndyuka priestesses, Ma Cato, renowned for her good works throughout the Ndyuka nation. Only later did we learn about her ambition and deceit, and how she succeeded in tricking her husband into evoking evil forces. At the first level, the myth extols the role of gifted individuals: their contributions are considered essential to the new religious movements of their days, the eighteenth century. But obiya are not only based on supernaturals, they also depend on human beings born with frailties. Hence their efficacy will occasionally suffer from serious weaknesses.

Ma Cato, the Prophet

After the Peace Treaty of 1760, less turbulent times began for the Ndyuka people. Soon religious life on the Tapanahoni became dominated by figures associated with the beginning of the Gaan Tata cult. Some of the most innovative among these early leaders were women.

Ma Cato was born a plantation slave; she joined a group of Runaways during her adolescence. This must have happened in the early part of the eighteenth century because, during a meeting with Dutch emissaries to the new Ndyuka nation in 1760, she was addressed as "Head of the Family," thus as a woman of considerable prestige (Wong 1938:331–332). Ndyuka historians confirm the early date of Ma Cato's escape into the jungle, saying that "she ran away while still a *kweyuman* [an 'apron girl'—or adolescent]." Ma Cato lived into old age and died in 1809.⁴ Documents from Dutch colonial archives corroborate her prominence in oral history. In 1760, Collerus, a Dutch delegate who took part in the peace negotiations between the planters and the Ndyuka, married Ma Cato.⁵ He died shortly after his return to Paramaribo, leaving this account of her:

She is the most notable woman among her folk and is greatly esteemed and respected by all, being moreover a priestess whose office or function consists of visiting the sick and decreeing what must be done to restore the health of the invalid, which decrees are carried out without exception. For example, if she charges that the invalid must be removed and carried to another dwelling, or that a bird must be slain or water strewn upon the ground, etc., all this must come to pass without gainsaying her because her authority rests on certain purported revelations which she receives after strange . . . movements of head and body, while one of her folk plays musical instruments. (Quoted in de Groot 1986:1680)

Pangaboko to the Rescue

All Ndyuka historians associate Ma Cato with the Pangaboko obiya. How Ma Cato gained control of this obiya is explained in the following mythical narrative.⁶

During the early years of the Ndyuka nation, the Tapanahoni was a most unhealthy place. Infant mortality was high. After one par-

ticularly severe epidemic killed many children, Pangaboko Antyoni, a famous *lukuman* [diviner] of the Misidyan clan, accepted a plea from Ndyuka elders to save their people from extinction. Pangaboko recalled that he had a good friend who had stayed behind on the plantation when he and several others escaped to freedom. This friend possessed a *goo obiya* or *meke pikin obiya*, a fertility obiya. Pangaboko returned to the coast [to the plantations] and succeeded in procuring the fetish from his old friend.

In another version, when Pangaboko escaped, he brought this obiya along. But in either version, Pangaboko rendered the Ndyuka a great service: his fertility charm ensured the survival of the Ndyuka nation. Newborns no longer died, and for the first time, Ndyuka historians stress, people began to feel at home in their villages along the Tapanahoni. They felt that Pangaboko's obiya had made the region fit for humans to live in. Some sources in the Otoo and Misidyan clans claim that Pangaboko's obiya shielded their ancestors from persistent attempts by Pinasi (a rival clan's) witches to kill them.

Ma Cato's Devious Ways

When Ma Cato married Pangaboko, the couple soon became famous for their knowledge of the obiya. Under pressure from her sisters, however, Cato came to the conclusion that the supremacy of her lineage could only be secured if all of Pangaboko's obiya would be hers as well. She pleaded with Pangaboko to instruct her in the sacred lore and knowledge of his obiya, but he would not hear of it. She persisted in her efforts, even going so far as to spy upon her husband when he withdrew to his secret shrine in the forest. Success came after she began staying up at night to listen to what Pangaboko mumbled in his sleep. From his half-comprehended words, memorizing everything she heard, Cato gradually gained an understanding of how his obiya worked. She learned about the taboos the obiya's owner had to respect, about its preferences and how one has to work with it. When she was through learning, Cato instructed her daughters.

Pangaboko's Anger

Pangaboko was enraged when he learned about his wife's spying. In one version he begged the gods to kill her (thereby committing *sende gadu*, a curse that is so sinful to utter that it borders on witchcraft). In another, Cato denied having spied on him, which prompted Pangaboko to challenge her. He dared her to join him in submitting to the poison ordeal, swearing a holy oath to speak the truth. This, Ndyuka historians explain, was either a grave mistake or a clever way to commit murder: no member of Cato's Otoo clan, either male or female, should ever submit to testing by the poison ordeal. When, long ago, the Otoo came to learn how to administer the ordeal, they also learned that the obiya's primary taboo concerned themselves: they were never to ingest the sacred potion.

By insisting that Cato take the oath, Pangaboko in effect killed her. For that, Gaan Tata punished Pangaboko by killing him. So they both died: Cato because she was an Otoo and should never have taken the oath and Pangaboko because he had forced her to do it. Cato died in the morning, Pangaboko in the afternoon. They were buried together in a single grave. But the knowledge of the obiya was lost to his children; he had neglected to instruct them. Cato had not made that mistake.

Why did Cato, a smart woman, accede to Pangaboko's demands that she, an Otoo, ingest the potion lethal to all Otoo? Ndyuka historians do not explain it; "it just so happened," was their answer to our questions. We venture the following guesses. First, Cato's Otoo clan was few in numbers, but Pangaboko's Misidyan clan was the most numerous of all Ndyuka clans. Pressure from Pangaboko, a leading Misidyan, meant that he had successfully mustered public opinion. Cato may have felt cornered by Pangaboko. Secondly, all obiya, and the Sweli obiya was no exception, were and are seen as *partly* man-made, and therefore as suffering from weaker or even deficient components. In our speculation, Cato was forced to gamble that the taboos of Sweli were perhaps not operative any longer or had been exaggerated—and she lost.

THE DIVINE LAWGIVER

As we have seen, the witch craze of 1890 known as "Coba removes evil things" was followed by the violent destruction of shrines and amulets, and the mass exorcism of possessing spirits. The iconoclastic drive soon spent itself, but the fear of witches remained.

To allay those fears; Ndyuka looked to Gaan Tata's priests for guidance, and they did not look in vain. Gaan Tata, many Ndyuka still insist, is the archenemy of witches. Gaan Tata agreed to help his people in their struggle, but only if his conditions were met. His first was that the detection and extirpation of this evil would be left to him alone. Only after someone had died could humans take a more active role, using corpse interrogation to find out whether Gaan Tata had been involved in the death or not. Once the person's ghost revealed that it had committed acts of witchcraft or had entertained evil thoughts, the funerary ritual was to be halted. In such cases the mourning ceremony was to be reduced to bare essentials and the bereaved could show no signs of distress but were expected to demonstrate their relief by jeering the deceased. A witch's corpse was to be isolated from decent society by being removed to an unholy spot and abandoned there, unburied. The witch's possessions were to be decontaminated and then distributed among the priests, the descendants, and Gaan Tata himself. Soon enough, two out of every three deaths were treated in this fashion.

A SPITEFUL GOD

Central to the social imagery that has dominated Ndyuka thinking for so long is the notion that Gaan Tata is a stern, vindictive deity. Ndyuka explain the differences between Agedeonsu (a fertility god with shrines in several Bilo villages) and Gaan Tata this way.

Gaan Tata is cruel, he gives you no rest. You always have to watch what you are doing and be careful about your thoughts. Agedeonsu is different. Where Gaan Tata acts like one of those terrible whites, always scolding us, always finding faults, Agedeonsu is quite different. She resembles another type of European: one who is loving, caring, ready to give solace, to protect the Ndyuka people from their enemies and from nature. She sees to it that the rains come when they are needed, and that there will be plenty of sun in the dry season. Fish and game in large quantities, abundant harvests, she sees to it all.⁷

Agedeonsu is consistently portrayed with some female traits; the worship for this deity is concentrated in the village of Tabiki. Agedeonsu even has a female incarnation in the god Ma Falu: her oracle is consulted in Nikii, a village close to Tabiki. When we asked people about the relationship between Agedeonsu and Ma Falu, people responded by saying that these were two aspects of the same god. We never heard of a female incarnation of Gaan Tata, which is the reason for us to speak of "he" when referring to Gaan Tata and "she" when writing about Agedeonsu.

A WITCH IS PUNISHED

The intensity of emotions invoked by witchcraft cases and the ruthless character of divine retribution are well illustrated in an account dating from the 1920s. It is written by Willem van Lier, a government official who spoke Ndyukatongo well and had worked in the area for years. In 1923, van Lier was eyewitness to events occurring after the death of Sa Donia, a woman from the village of Gaan Poowi whose ghost confessed to crimes of witchcraft. In a final postmortem plea, the ghost sent a message to the Gaanman and the Gaan Tata priests, declaring that "She [Donia] cannot fix the day on which to be thrown away [abandoned in the forest], as she had not yet settled her affairs." But, according to van Lier, the Chief rejected the request for postponement, announcing that "she must leave my realm immediately; her affairs will be settled by Gaan Tata. Donia's ghost signaled that she would obey, and set the hour for her corpse to be taken from the village for the following day at noon."

During the time when the corpse is not being carried around, it is wrapped in a sheet and laid on the bare floor of the mortuary, to be

cursed and mocked by the villagers and those who have come especially for that purpose from other parts. Nobody, not even her children, may mourn for a wisiman [witch]. Today, on December 30, a lugubrious feast is being celebrated at Gaan Poowi. Donia's corpse is being taken away. There is laughter and merriment because a wicked person has left the earth. At about noon all the villagers and visitors gather at the landing-stage to be able presently to pursue the spirit with their jeers. The corpse, without a coffin, carried on the heads of two men, is deposited in a large boat. Four oarsmen take their places. When they push off, there is a loud and general outcry: "Heelu ooo, mi e, gi yu helu, héélu, héélu, héélu, héélu, ooo!" which amounts to "I wash my hands of you." This was repeated at every village along the way. (van Lier, quoted in de Groot 1969:116–118)

A WITCH IS SNIFFED OUT

Sa Donia died in 1923. The reporter of this event was a colonial official. Do our findings justify portraying these key Ndyuka rituals and beliefs as gruesome and oppressive?

It is difficult for anthropologists, steeped as we are in cultural relativism and professional appreciation for all the good-enough ways that human life can be lived, to be critical of the belief-based behaviors of the people who have been—for decades—not only our hosts but our friends. We have struggled for years with the question of how (or even whether) to present these data. Can we justify portraying fundamental Ndyuka rituals and beliefs as gruesome and oppressive? In fairy tales, the people we care about live happily ever after, but ethnography is not a fairy tale. All cultures (certainly our own!) incorporate events, assumptions, and accepted behaviors that are dysfunctional and anti-social from any but the most instrumentalist points of view. Moreover, what is important to note here is that the strongest condemnations of the abuses of the Gaan Tata cult do not come from missionaries or anthropologists. It was Akalali and his followers, who ruled Ndyuka society during the 1970s, who condemned this religious tradition in the strongest terms possible, depicting it as wasteful, sinful, and even criminal. More than two decades after Akalali's reign, many Ndyuka still hesitate to support a rebirth of the Gaan Tata cult. They recall its abuses and openly express their fear that a rejuvenated Gaan Tata priesthood will inevitably resort to its old, sinful behavior again. Corpse divination, in many ways an underpinning of any future Gaan Tata renaissance, has only been reintroduced in half-a-dozen villages.

Fearing death and corpses is a universal trait among human beings, whether it is denied, accepted, or sublimated. It can therefore take some unusual expressions, cross-culturally. But some adaptations are unquestionably less successful than others. We were forced to ask ourselves: What does it cost people in a kinship-based society

like the Ndyuka's to be unable to mourn their dead? What does it mean to each individual who contemplates the inevitable to know that the odds are two to one that one's loving parents, children, and siblings will be forced to abuse one's corpse and revile one's memory, denying themselves the catharsis of grief?

A few years before we first came to live in Diitabiki, one Da Kenkina, custodian of an important shrine in the neighboring village of Kisai, decided to settle near Gaanman and High Priest Akontu Velanti. Kenkina died in Diitabiki during our fieldwork. On the morning of his death, one of Akontu's deputies walked through the silent village shouting: "All men of Diitabiki, please assemble at the mortuary. Someone has died. This is an emergency. Come and sit with us and assist those who have to carry the dead person."

By eight o'clock many men were present. After much bantering and deliberating, a pair of corpse bearers was recruited from among them. One was a Captain from a nearby village, the other an elder from Bilo. When the bier with the corpse tied to it was placed on their heads, nothing happened for long minutes. Then, after some initially hesitant movements, the bier tilted downwards and sideways, returning slowly to its original position. (Bystanders murmured: "Something is wrong here; the ghost cannot do its job properly.") Slowly the bearers moved towards a headman of the gravediggers, who rose to address the ghost peremptorily: "Our Gaanman has lost some people. Can you find them for him?" A short sideways movement of the bier followed, meaning that the answer was negative. Suddenly the bier moved forward, stopping in front of an elder, almost knocking him over. This was repeated five times with different people. Knowing they had been selected for a private interrogation of the ghost, these elders followed the bearers to a place behind some houses, far enough away that people in the gathering could not overhear their discussion. When this ad hoc committee returned, they went directly to the Gaanman to whisper their findings. We could only hear Akontu's response: "Good. How can you argue with a ghost? But let his own relatives also do a stint of carrying."

After many more deliberations, a new team of bearers was finally selected from among the members of Kenkina's family. Again the ghost insisted on discussing matters with a small committee in private, the result of which was again whispered to Akontu, who asked his second-in-command to announce the findings. This priest told the gathering:

Kenkina's ghost was so ashamed of what he did during the last years of his life that he could hardly talk. We had to force him to give us the full story. The truth is that while Kenkina was in charge of the most important obiya in Kisai village, he poisoned it.⁸ The obiya gradually lost its power. Patients were sent home with bad advice. Some fell ill and never recovered. Gaan Tata decided to intervene. He killed Kenkina by giving him a terrible sickness. There is nothing more to tell.

A bystander remarked: "He did suffer terribly for his sins; he stank and he was in pain every day. That must have been why the man's feet were so skinny these last few years." At this point the High Priest stepped in to clarify the message, reminding his audience that the spirit had been asked twice to do what any decent ghost can do—find people in hiding—but the answer had been that he (the ghost) could not. The priest continued,

Always remember, it is not *me* telling you this or that, this is a message from the ghost itself. The spirit is so ashamed that he begs for permission to leave this civilized company at once. He feels he cannot stay with honest people any longer. Remember that it was not Gaan Tata telling people what to think; it was the ghost who made a confession. The ghost gave us a long list of all his crimes. We should all be grateful to Gaan Tata for delivering us from Kenkina.

As soon as these words had been spoken, the bier was raised and brought to a boat at the landing. No one cried, no one showed grief. We were not allowed to watch the rest of the proceedings but were asked to leave the vicinity of the mortuary: "The family would take it badly if Outsiders were present when their relative was hauled away in such a shameful manner." From our house, we caught glimpses of gravediggers hustling the corpse to the boat, then hurriedly paddling and punting their way to the witches' cemetery, a place some ten miles from Diitabiki.

DIVINE OMNISCIENCE AND HUMAN SELF-EXAMINATION

One of the most remarkable aspects of Gaan Tata's creed was its Puritanism. People felt certain that the godhead avidly watched their behavior for the slightest trace of moral corruption. But even more puritanical, and intrusive, was Gaan Tata's constant scrutiny of his people's thoughts and feelings. The Ndyuka say: "Gaan Tata is the god who looks down into our hearts, and from whom we cannot hide our evil thoughts." This divine monitoring was considered a permanent process, a continuous activity. This (to the Ndyuka) profoundly revolutionary notion fitted the cult's first priority: to detect witches and exterminate them.

In Ndyuka theology, witches are never helpless victims of an infectious evil, but people willingly seduced into harming relatives and neighbors. They learn to be witches on a ladder of increasingly graver offenses against others—but with opportunity at every step to turn back, to resist further temptation. Precisely what makes witches so evil is that they know what they are doing. Therefore the ordeal and its priests required a corollary to the concept of an omniscient god: the



Figure 15 Praying to the gaanwan, the “great ancestors.” Food and drinks are offered in the enclosure (Diitabiki, 1962).

need for the faithful to probe their own consciences. Gaan Tata’s priests constantly exhorted the faithful to search their hearts for feelings of envy, for hatred, resentment, and long-harbored grudges. And the faithful must have obeyed, for how else but through the horror that most of us feel upon critically analyzing our own thoughts, would these decent, normal people have continued to believe that literally anyone and everyone of those they lived among and knew might prove to have been capable of the most depravedly hostile behavior imaginable? The notion of guilt was not foreign to traditional Ndyuka religious life; what *was* new was the extent to which it came to dominate people’s emotions. Equally novel (in this culture area) was the emphasis on forcing people to walk a straight and narrow path under the perpetual scrutiny of an inner eye.⁹

A crucial moment for all Ndyuka was the day when their village community was ordered to journey to Diitabiki and renew the oath. At night, supervised by the priests, people were to dip their finger in Gaan Tata’s elixir and swear never to commit the crimes of witchcraft. This oath renewal was double-edged: those who already were witches or were tempted to become one, would fall ill within a few days after the ritual. But for the upright citizen, to ingest a few drops of the drink would mean new strength to shield one against the dangers of the world, witchcraft being prominent among these. The custom of taking the oath in this fashion had been introduced by Menisaki around 1885;

the incorporation of the ordeal into the Gaan Tata complex dates from about 1890, at the end of the Coba investigations (see chapter 5).

Apart from the capital sin of witchcraft, the priests severely condemned suicide and its attempt, physical aggression, adultery, and homosexuality. The taboos surrounding menstrual seclusion, which occupy a central place in traditional Ndyuka culture, now became even more stringent; infringements were severely punished. One is reminded here of Anthony Wallace's account (1972 [1969]:316) of Handsome Lake, the Seneca prophet, who issued a catalogue of sins and their punishment he called Gaiwiio, the Good Word. The Great Father's priests shared many of the Seneca prophet's preoccupations, but did not insist on stricter observance of traditional communal religious rituals, as Handsome Lake did. By the end of the nineteenth century, Ndyuka river transporters had radically transformed their traditional society with its strong network of communal obligations into a social environment these entrepreneurs felt more at home in. They were not motivated to pressure Gaan Tata's priests into reinvigorating communal rituals. But they greatly feared those who might envy others their prosperity.

VISUALIZING A SOCIAL IMAGERY

The social imagery that emerged in Ndyuka society around 1890 assumed that the danger of corruption lurked everywhere, that individuals lived perilously close to a state of "dys-grace" (supernatural disfavor) or might already have succumbed to it. We have reconstructed this social imagery largely on the basis of oral history accounts and isolated clues, images gleaned from a wider universe of ideational data. The analysis of ritual or mythical complexes offers firmer grounds to stand on, providing us with clusters of ideas and fantasy images, reducing the hazards in any more-or-less arbitrary selection of material.

The ritual complex of Saantigoon is one such meaningful cluster. It is also an apt example of how a social imagery may find its translations into spatial forms, a condensation of ideas and imaginations in one limited, well-defined area. Following Hillman (1975:91), we will refer to this space as a "theater of the emotions," a place where images are envisioned and instantly acted out.

Saantigoon, Gaan Tata's main sanctuary, is located at the heart of Ndyuka territory in the forest opposite the village of Puketi. Saantigoon represents an extended ritual complex that includes the creek where witches' corpses were left above ground in divine retribution and the forest shrine that for some symbolized human submission and for others marked a business deal between god and humans. Two years after the 1972 collapse of the Gaan Tata cult in the Tapanahoni region, the rebel prophet Akalali invited us on a guided tour of Saantigoon. The following description is excerpted from our notes of that event.

An hour's walking distance from its hidden landing, the place presents a cheerless sight. The path, which seems to once have been cut very wide, is now largely overgrown. We pass through rioting vegetation to an open space. There the remains of material goods earned by hard labor are rotting away. Piles of rusted clothes lockers dating from Gaanman Amaketi's days (the 1920s) mark one end, at the other lie similar boxes from an even earlier time. There is a huge stack of now useless household utensils—brightly colored, enameled pots and pans from Hong Kong (fig. 16). Among these lie the trophy possessions of once-proud wage earners from the heydays of the transport industry (1885–1920): huge vases, stone animal statues, Madonnas, and other mantelpiece decorations. Before Akalali broke the back of the Gaan Tata cult and people rushed over here to rescue whatever might still have some value, this mound was about ten feet high and covered about one acre. We were told that once there were piles of gold chains, shoes, and plastic ware, that heaps of clothes were displayed on racks. We saw only decayed remnants.

The Ndyuka offer various explanations for all this waste. Some insist that bringing so many valuables to the forest shrine to rot should be considered an expiatory act, a sacrifice from the Ndyuka to Gaan Tata, an offering intended to mitigate his wrath. Others hold a



Figure 16 Akalali at Saantigoon. Note the discarded effects of witches (Saantigoon, 1974).

more mercenary view, maintaining that the offerings represented nothing more than payment for services rendered—for the destruction of witches. When they are in a more reflective mood and our discretion seems assured, some even suggest that Saantigoon was a matter of divine “overkill.” Gaan Tata, these believers assert, started out simply to protect decent people against witches, but overshot his aim, killing far too many human beings, polluting forest, creek, and river with unburied corpses, and thereby angering the gods of the Earth. To placate these powers, Gaan Tata had given them a share of the confiscated goods. For some Ndyuka this was the real reason for the sacred dump. A still different view, one that came to light only after the cult’s demise, is that Gaan Tata had seen some of his children condemned for acts of witchcraft they never committed. The deity blamed manipulative kinsmen for these perversions of his justice. He therefore took the expected inheritances away, leaving them to rot in the jungle rather than letting wicked kinsmen have them.

ANALYSIS

Whatever the native focus or explanation, shrine and creek appear to be inseparable components of a single symbolic structure; they belong together like the elements in a chemical compound. The infrastructure of the ritual complex consists of temple huts, paths, landings, and offering places. Its dogma includes rites for the disposal of corpses and for the presentation of goods to the deity—an intricate system of ideas and fantasies. It is the concentration and structuring of imaginations around a spatial complex that interests us here. Seen from this perspective, Saantigoon presents a fairly complicated theater, consisting of various fantasy scenarios or scripts. Three of these were presented by the Ndyuka almost as if they were a single package: retribution, meekness, and exchange with the deity. Over time, the Ndyuka eased their emphasis on the scripts of divine revenge and human self-effacement, pointing instead at the themes of divine guilt and of crooked kinsmen.

This suggests a transfer from exposed to hidden scripts, from publicly acknowledged theological explanation to privately discussed background matters. Believers had an opportunity to travel through imaginary space, from one set of feelings to another. Gaan Tata’s adepts could substitute their smug righteousness with feelings of guilt and self-doubt, or vice versa. The theater offered them a place where they could switch among various significant emotional positions, depending on external pressures and internal motives. One could travel, for example, from “a business transaction with the deity” to the issue of divine guilt and the complicity of relatives.

FEAR, BETRAYAL, AND OTHER EXPLANATIONS

When the Gaan Tata cult was still strong, and we anthropologists had no knowledge yet about the “underside” of this institution, there was one thing that struck us as strange. Witches, we understood, were to be removed from human society at the earliest possible moment and taken to a place where no one sane would come to pray to or honor them. But one day when we asked questions about a small shrine adjoining Gaan Tata’s temple, a priest calmly explained to us that this was where the shades of witches could still be contacted. This struck us then as an anomaly. The idea of Gaan Tata acting as a patron to these witches seemed illogical, it was something we had no explanation for. But when we were about to disregard it, the Ndyuka reminded us that the relatives of witches often play a Judas role at inquests, giving the kiss of death to a relative accused of being a witch, lending their seal of approval to every condemnation. For most of the nineteenth century, witches had been burned at the stake. It was usually their own blood-relatives who took the lead in the torture that preceded the immolation. Early in the twentieth century, family members were often the first to spit on the corpse. Gaan Tata, it was explained, took pity on these witches; he felt they were orphans, ostracized by their families. His anger at that callousness made him take their effects from their families, and invite the abused ghost to come and reside with him.

Such explanations cast doubt on the righteous anger of the family, so manifestly furious at discovering a witch in their midst, so ready to erase this person from their very memories. The sacred dump raises further questions about the godhead himself. As long as Gaan Tata’s priests remained unchallenged, people shrugged off our questions about what happened at the forest shrine: “Well, you know, these are reasonable people [meaning the priests], they deposit some odds and ends there, a bunch of rotting bananas, some empty bottles. Nothing of value, you understand; they know what they are doing.” But when we first visited the dump in 1974, and saw the scale of it, we realized that the dump manifested a powerful counterpoint to the theme of the-merciless-but-just-deity. Pile after pile of valuables, rotting away to the greater glory of Gaan Tata, suggests that the deity’s virtues may have been exaggerated to mask fundamental weaknesses: miserliness and greed—his, and/or the boat owners’. Over-emphasis on qualities like discipline and censoriousness could not disguise, did indeed *point* to, an irrational negativity in Gaan Tata’s character: his lust for wholesale and wanton destruction. His own sanctuary belied his manifest legitimations. The fact that Saantigoon was not only closed to Bakaa but to most Ndyuka revealed that even the priests themselves felt less than comfortable with this institution. The arrogation and wasting of

property exposed a fundamental destructiveness—the witches and their persecutors seemed to meld together until they were functionally interchangeable. Gaan Tata was the arch witch!

This realization has convinced us that straightforward ethnographic accounts are necessarily and unavoidably misleading: behind the surface depiction of the mundane or exotic there may lurk another reality that suggests widely shared ambivalence about the axiomatic assumptions that every culture is based on. For the Ndyuka, while some character traits, such as greediness, are hotly condemned, they are projected onto the deity, which suggests Ndyuka vicariously receive pleasure in amassing wealth and in miserliness, and in inflicting cruelty. In this respect it is interesting to note that a critical historical account of Ma Cato and Da Pangaboko in the first Gaan Tata cult only began to circulate after the Gaan Tata priesthood had lost its battle with the rebel prophet Akalali.

Depending on their social positions and on historic developments, different groups and different individuals may endorse different segments of the social imagery. This raises a question: Who appropriates which elements, and when? Most Ndyuka, regardless of their clans or villages, embraced most elements of the social imagery that came to be known as Gaan Tata's creed—though over the course of our fieldwork we noted a subtle shift, from publicly avowed speculations to a more critical stance. But it is possible that more critical imaginations had been kept safely veiled during our early periods of fieldwork, only daring to be expressed in the 1980s.

Notes

- ¹ From the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, Second Ed., (p. 955): "Imagery [...] Psychol. Mental images collectively, esp. those produced by the action of the imagination."
- ² Social imageries resemble the paradigms of the social sciences, which derive their uniqueness from a rationale that is "the basic idea, the point of view, behind its formation and structure" (Willer 1967:17). For a more extensive discussion of social imageries, or collective fantasies, see Thoden van Velzen (1995).
- ³ Our informant used the English word.
- ⁴ Morssink (1932–1935) suggests that the year of her escape could have been 1730. This seems realistic. Ma Cato was already a figure of some prominence in the 1760s. According to a governmental delegation (the Sara Creek commission of 1809), visiting the Ndyuka, she died on 14 September, 1809 (ARA HVP 967).
- ⁵ Collerus's marriage to Ma Cato may not have fulfilled all the requirements of a Ndyuka marriage, but it was certainly more than a symbolic union. In Paramaribo, at Collerus's graveside, it was Cato's son who spoke the eulogy. Part of Collerus's effects were sent to Cato (de Groot 1997:190).
- ⁶ The story of the obiya's transfer is one of the most widely spread among oral history accounts. It has been related to us with only minor variations by Da Kelema and Da Pauwkalè, both of the Misidyan clan, and by Da Akalali, of the Pataa clan. But in the course of our fieldwork, various people from other clans told us more or less the same story.

- ⁷ Our source for this divine typecasting were Akalali, the rebel prophet whom we will meet later, and Da Pantea, a deputy priest of Agedeonsu in the 1960s.
- ⁸ This is believed to be a standard technique for a shaman turned witch. By poisoning the obiya on which others rely for their health, he is assured of killing the greatest number of people.
- ⁹ Such theological notions smack of Christianity. Although very few missionaries visited the Tapanahoni region during the nineteenth century, Ndyuka were well-acquainted with Christian ideas. One should be careful, however, of attributing "self-examination" and related ideas to the teachings of missionaries. Equally, we feel disinclined to ascribe the notion of Gaan Tata as a divine disciplinarian to the proselytizing of missionaries. Along with van der Elst (1970:183) we would caution against any acceptance of superficial correspondences—between Maroon conceptions of the supernatural and Judeo-Christian theology—as proof of syncretistic origin. To paraphrase van der Elst: "Ndyuka religion is not imitation Christianity."

Dikii and the King of the Wilderness

A REVOLUTION

During the 1970s, a prophetic movement wrought great changes in the cultural and political life of Suriname's Maroons. Where a few years earlier Kaabu had failed to reform the Gaan Tata cult and its excesses, a forty-eight-year-old Ndyuka man, Akalali, now succeeded. In 1972 he assumed the role of Ogii's medium, with the help of Dominiki's descendants and allies—and against the opposition of Gaan Tata's priests. Kaabu, still honored as medium for Dominiki's ghost (see chapter 3), openly swung her support to Akalali by settling in his village. Ogii had returned to the Ndyuka to restore order in a corrupt world. Akalali and his adepts announced that the time had come for Gaan Tata to make room for the native deity. They abolished both the postmortem inquest—the corpse carrying—and the punishment of witches and sinners, calling the institution of the sacred dump and the abandonment of corpses not only irrelevant to modern Ndyuka society, but wasteful and even sinful. "Take the inquest away, and the whole array of exploitations by Gaan Tata's priests will come tumbling down," they claimed. Akalali did more than destroy the Gaan Tata cult; he awoke the Ndyuka to the "realities" of another ancient religion. His teachings emphasized neither guilt, moral guidelines for

individual behavior, nor self-examination. Quite the contrary. Akalali, who argued that obedience to moral law had been the fundamental weakness of the Ndyuka people and that all restrictions on individual freedom should be eliminated, dismissed the moral teachings of Gaan Tata's priests as mere hypocrisy, as crude political stratagems to exploit the masses.¹ In many ways then, Akalali's religious messages diametrically opposed those of Gaan Tata's priests. Like most previous prophets who had tried to bring Ogii's message to the Ndyuka, Akalali championed the right of the strong and merciless (irrespective of whether these were divines or mortals) to enjoy unrestricted gratification of impulses, whether in pleasure or through aggression.

Akalali's opposition to the Gaan Tata priesthood and their moral laws was based on a number of closely related myths about the King of the Wilderness (Ogii) and his human vessel Dikii, an infamous shaman who lived in the nineteenth century.

THE KING OF THE WILDERNESS

Ogii is always portrayed as a divine entity innate to Suriname's hinterland, a world shared by Amerindians and forest spirits that predates the Ndyuka's arrival. Ogii, the king of all forest spirits (Ampuku), is considered a permanent feature of this environment, a nature spirit "who has always been there." This is evidenced in the myth of the initial encounter between Ndyuka fleeing from the plantations and Ogii. That meeting was described with two stories:

While they were scouting deep in the interior for a place to settle, they emerged from the dark forest to hit on the wide, sunny expanse of the Tapanahoni River. There, quite unexpectedly, they caught their first glimpse of the deity. They saw a boat moving upstream without any effort on the part of its three occupants, the crew did not even touch their paddles. Then, as suddenly as they had come into view, boat and crew disappeared, dissolving into thin air—in the way spirits are wont to do. Afterwards our ancestors realized what they had seen: the man occupying the central and most prestigious place in the boat must have been an important spirit belonging to the area, and his two companions were his spirit lieutenants. Their skin color was reddish, like that of Amerindians.²

We were fleeing the plantations, struggling through the deep forest. After three days we saw a man, a tall man. The man kept ahead of us. We fugitives followed him, Den Tualufu [meaning "The Twelve Clans," a synonym for the Ndyuka nation]. With his bare hands the giant blazed a trail through the jungle. After another three days we lost sight of him. But we could clearly see the path he had prepared for us. Branches had been broken off; trees had been uprooted. The trail stretched ahead of us and we had no difficulty following it; the entity knew where the river was.

In this way we arrived at Kiyoo Kondee. We built a village there. Nothing then revealed the deity's presence anymore. Everybody, every single clan, went its own way.³

THE INFAMOUS SHAMAN

The cluster of myths surrounding Dikii, Ogi's human vessel, is much more extensive. Dikii, also known as "Bad Thing" (*Ogii Sani*) and "Large Tree" (*Gaan Udu*, a euphemism for the old public latrines known to us from oral history),⁴ is a historical figure. He was born around 1800.⁵ Archival documents from the 1830s and early 1840s indicate that Dikii worked as a bounty hunter, hired by plantation owners to catch new Runaways. He operated in the forests between the plantations and the Maroons' settlements. All clans present accounts of Dikii's life, which suggests that the man played a historical role relevant to all Ndyuka. The following six narratives, taken from Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering (1988), are representative of a large body of relevant myths.

First Tale: Irresponsible Women, Opportunistic Husbands

Long ago, Ma Boti Aponti, a Ndyuka woman, went to the forest to cut the fruits of the maripa palm. She was accompanied by her younger sister. At a certain spot, the two women observed a creature squatting against a tree, head bent down, knees drawn up to the chest. They could not see its face. It looked like a human being but it was a spirit. The creature did not want the humans to see its face. It was pitch black. Aponti suggested touching the creature so that it would remove its hands and thereby uncover its face. But her sister warned her not to provoke it. In spite of these warnings, Aponti cut a crooked, forked stick and poked the creature with it. The creature did not look up. The women dared not make any further attempts at arousing the creature. Aponti flung the stick away, urinated, and with her sister quickly left the spot.

They agreed not to tell anybody about the encounter. The younger sister, however, told Agbaato, Aponti's husband. Agbaato scolded his wife: "You should have been the first to tell me, not your sister. I may wind up having to pay for your reckless act. But as things stand now, you are the only one responsible. So if things go badly for you because of this, I'll deny involvement. But if they work out, I want my share of the profits."⁶

As this myth tries to show, human relations are fraught with risk and uncertainty. Agreements between friends, or even within the close circle of relatives, cannot always be counted on. This fickleness in human nature may elicit supernatural disfavor and retribution. But the surest way to gain the enmity of a supernatural is to trespass on its territory, to disturb it and abuse it. The women were at fault for having been too inquisitive, entering an area of power and knowledge where they should never have intruded.

When he narrated the myth, Akalali made an interesting comment: their men had left these women behind when they went to the Coast to seek work as lumberjacks. He seemed to be hinting that there was a more general condition that could explain and perhaps partly justify the women's recklessness: they had been left without adequate support and were desperate. Akalali also stressed how irresponsible Agbaato, Aponti's husband, had been. This remark, that women often had to fend for themselves because of irresponsible or absent husbands, seems to argue against the adoration of aggressive and successful men. These were but two of the implications in the social imagery spread by Ogii's acolytes. Such unresolved conflicts often turn up in themes of social imageries.

Second Tale: A Spirit at Large

After the forest encounter, Aponti found herself pregnant, which was attributed to invasion by the spirit she had aroused. One omen awoke people to an approaching evil: the pregnancy lasted 12 months. A second was displayed when the newborn first opened his mouth: it was full of teeth! The infant held a pouch in its left hand, but no one was able to open its tiny fist to inspect the contents. Only after he grew older did little Dikii first open his fist: his little bag was full of obiya. The child astonished his parents by sitting up almost as soon as he was born. The mother took fright; the father exclaimed, "What does this mean?" The child overheard them and laughed defiantly, flashing its teeth. When he showed them a glimpse of the obiya in his purse, Ma Aponti cried out: "We are finished, evil has come to me!"

She had great trouble nursing the child because it hurt her nipples with its teeth. But the boy grew up quickly, much more rapidly than others of his age. The reason for that unnatural rate of growth was his uncanny ability to extract nourishment from feces. Dikii had developed this predilection already as a fetus, forcing his mother, Ma Aponti, to stay near the open-air latrine. After he was born, he craved excrement and continued to eat it.⁷

Third Tale: Dikii the Bully

Dikii dominated his mother. When as a fetus he compelled her to remain near the latrine, Aponti is said to have "enjoyed the perfumes." Their special relationship continued through infancy and adolescence: Aponti called him "Dikii," meaning "The Tickler." He was 10 or 12 years old when he began telling people that he had seen his own conception, and that he was responsible for it, implying that he was Danger incarnate. People understood that Ogii, furious at having been disturbed by Aponti, decided to follow her to her village. When her husband Agbaato made love to her, Ogii pushed him aside and impregnated Aponti himself.

As a young man, Dikii appeared to be very attractive to women, inviting other men's jealousy. But after a while, Dikii's lust for

women began to outstrip the interest he aroused in them. When this dawned on him, he started threatening them: if a woman resisted him, he would unleash his spirit helpers, the forest deities, to punish her. He acted increasingly tyrannical, even ordering some married men to hand over their wives to him. Resistance meant quick retaliation: death would strike down that husband. Women who withheld their favors were given somewhat more time, but if they continued to refuse him, death would be their fate also. Naturally such behavior undermined his position. His medium, Akalali, put it this way: "When Dikii began playing tyrant he became impossible, intolerable to us all."

Dikii was extremely competitive. Whenever someone showed a talent for something, Dikii would do his utmost to prove that he could do it better. Whether in dancing or in the *agi* game [a board game derived from Africa], Dikii always needed to outshine others. He tricked people into competing with him, usually by giving them a head start. He would let his adversary win twice, but then he would beat him while shouting "I have killed you! And what is dead remains dead." Three days later his rival would indeed be dead. If people were dancing *susa* [a traditional funerary dance requiring virtuoso footwork], Dikii would bait them by letting them outperform him for a while, then he'd strike back. Usually he won, shouting the traditional "Bada, bada hee!" [I have killed you!]. If he lost, his rivals were really in trouble. Dikii would taunt them with "The trap may flatten the rat, but the rat will flatten the earth!" and within three days his rival would have passed away.⁸

Still, Dikii enjoyed great fame as a shaman. From every Tapanahoni village, patients flocked to him, bringing considerable fees. Dikii claimed to be a medium for Kumanti, Papagadu, and Ampuku, which means that spirits from all three supernatural domains possessed him, a highly unusual situation since Kumanti and Ampuku embody irreconcilable principles. At present, we know of no medium who is a vessel to both types of spirits.

Fourth Tale: Dikii Alienates His Own Family

In nineteenth-century Ndyuka society, no person suspected of witchcraft could be delivered into the hands of Sweli's priests (Gaan Tata's precursors) to suffer the poison ordeal without the cooperation of his or her matrilineal relatives. It is no longer possible to tell when Dikii began losing his own family's support, but the process of decline may have started when he intentionally ruined one of his elder brother's shamanistic performances. That incident occurred while shamans from many villages were gathered together for the joint performance of a ritual.

In those days, when a shaman wished the spirit to speak unambiguously, he would first have to bring its medium into a state of unconsciousness. Then, when the shaman had made the ritual

preparations, the medium would rise from the slumber and the possessing spirit could manifest itself clearly, speaking its sacred language. Dikii was present at one such occasion. It was standard procedure at that time for shamans to wrap several acolytes in bed sheets, like corpses, and put them to sleep in hammocks in the *dede osu* [the village mortuary]. This time, when the shamans had finished their preparations and the time had come for the acolytes to regain consciousness, Dikii pressed his toe into the earth. This was awkward, because the shamans were now unable to arouse the novices from their deep sleep. People feared that they might never return to the living. Then Dikii showed the other shamans further proof of his ability. He lifted his toe, and immediately the acolytes woke up. The offended shamans, one of whom was Dikii's older brother Abuusu, never forgave him for this demonstration of power. For the rest of his life, Abuusu would harbor a grudge against his younger brother. This was also the last time that shamans ever attempted to render people unconscious.⁹

The relationship between the two brothers deteriorated even more when Dikii made trouble for Da Anuma, his brother's friend. Abuusu, who had no peer among Ndyuka shamans, had been instructing Anuma in Kumanti obiya. During the nineteenth century, it was considered good manners among medicine men to collaborate with their colleagues. For example, when they were about to start a ritual or treatment, they would inform their associates. In accordance with this tradition, Dikii and Anuma went on a hunting and fishing trip together. They journeyed to the upper reaches of the Tapanahoni, sleeping in forest camps along the way.

One day Anuma and Dikii were setting fish traps. Anuma's camp was upstream from Dikii's, and at that time each was working for himself. While inspecting their fish traps in the early hours of the morning, Dikii found his traps "jumping with fish," but those of Anuma had attracted only alligators and anacondas—things one cannot eat. Since they embody reptile spirits, killing them would cause a *kunu* [an avenging spirit].

On the second day Anuma rose while it was still dark to inspect his fish traps. Again he was disappointed; again they contained only caimans and snakes. But Dikii's traps were full of edible fish. In an attempt to improve his luck, Anuma stealthily exchanged the traps, but when he returned the next dawn, his still hadn't caught anything useful. Now Anuma's suspicion was fully aroused. He paddled his canoe to Dikii's forest camp and belligerently accused him of witchcraft. But for one reason or another, they patched things up.

When their supply of baked manioc ran out, they still had not caught enough fish. So they decided to return to their villages to replenish their supplies. They were so far from home that it would take at least four days to make the round-trip. But when the moment came for them to leave, Dikii brusquely told Anuma that he already had been to his village and back. Anuma, in utter disbe-

lief, replied that he must be joking, but Dikii showed him his fresh supply of manioc cakes. Anuma then accused Dikii of witchcraft for a second time.

Anuma took to his boat and returned five days later to another unpleasant surprise: Dikii's *baikoto* [meat drying and smoking rack] was loaded with game. Dikii curtly told him: "I'm returning to the village, I am finished here." The next day, when Dikii stopped by Anuma's camp to tell him he was on his way, he found Anuma in a very bad mood. All the game he had shot or caught during his earlier stay was rotting away. Anuma threatened Dikii: "Look, all my meat is spoiled. You did this with your witchcraft. Come, let us fight!"

Dikii left Anuma to return to Katina Sófia [abandoned since about 1850], his village. Anuma remained behind in his forest camp but, after continued bad luck, he returned to Godoolo, his home. He sent a message to Dikii accusing him of witchcraft: "I have not been able to catch any game, so let us fight on Gaan Tabiki island.¹⁰ Better prepare all your obiya!"

Anuma had been assured by Abuusu that his younger brother would not escape punishment. All day long Anuma prepared himself at his obiya shrine, a *faakatiki* dedicated to the Kumanti spirits. But when morning came, people found his dead body lying on the ground, next to his shrine. When Abuusu heard this he exclaimed: "Oho! Dikii has an evil thing at his command. What will it do to me? Close kin is much more vulnerable!" [Meaning that Dikii would find it easier to kill Abuusu with witchcraft than Anuma.] Dikii then ridiculed Abuusu in public: "It's those pathetic obiya you sold Anuma that got him killed!" Thereupon Abuusu took all the obiya from his shrine, bundled them up, and sold them downstream to Da Oduamá, the great Kumanti specialist of the Aluku people.¹¹

Fifth Tale: A Superman Degenerates into a Witch

During this phase of his life, many people considered Dikii a *wisiwasiman* (fool), no longer someone to be feared or respected. Some made fun of him to his face. A few even dared to taunt him, challenging him to show how much support he could get from his friends, the forest spirits. According to legend, Dikii, offended and resentful, then unleashed evil spirits against his detractors. In other words, they had caused him to degenerate into a witch.

One day Dikii brought his canoe to one of Puketi's boat landings where a number of children were playing. When one of them made fun of him, Dikii gave him a corncob, and later that day the child died. When Dikii returned to Puketi for another visit, Ma Konu, a priestess of Sweli, saw him coming. Before he could even moor his boat, she had shooed all the children away and told Dikii he was no longer welcome in her village.¹²

Soon Dikii became shunned as a witch in most of the Tapanahoni villages, where he felt he was treated like dirt. Needing to live among

people who would still respect him, he went to the Ndyuka settlements on the Cottica River. But news traveled faster: when he arrived at the boat landing of one important Cottica village, people ran away, shouting: "A witch has come!" They fled into their houses, closing their doors.

Sixth Tale: A Martyr

Not even in childhood had Dikii ever shown any concern for the rights and well-being of others. Fearing his alleged powers, people usually gave in to his demands. But now the tables were turned. When the Pinasi, his own clansmen, began deserting him, all of Ndyuka followed suit. People would no longer tolerate his selfishness, his eccentricities, or his extortion. As one historian said: "If someone bested him it meant death for that person; if someone scolded him, that meant death, too."¹³

His own Pinasi ultimately delivered him into the hands of the Otoo custodians of the poison ordeal. They had trussed him, brought him to Puketi, and tied him to the tree where the ordeal was traditionally administered. His mouth was forced open so the potion could be poured in. He was then beaten into submission and disgraced: they shaved his head and rubbed feces into his scalp.¹⁴

But after a week had gone by without Dikii showing any sign of impending death or even illness, he had to be released.

Dikii was consumed with rage. With the help of several forest spirits, he plotted a terrible revenge upon his enemies. Even the whites would not escape punishment, for they had connived with the Sweli priests. Some had even assisted in his apprehension. Dikii unleashed Ogii's terrible retribution. He secured the help of Napoleon, a European who worked for Ogii as an assistant. Through the machinations of Ogii and Napoleon, the Europeans started a terrible war amongst themselves. More than 3,000 died in that war.¹⁵

His humiliation at Puketi so depressed Dikii that he began "roaming the woods, weighted down under the yoke of the Oath [Sweli's ordeal]." He finally reached the Suriname River and asked the Saamaka permission to settle in one of their villages. But his evil reputation was so firmly established throughout the interior that the Saamaka refused to have anything to do with him. After many such disappointments, Dikii was finally offered hospitality by an elder at Maipa Ondoo, a Ndyuka village on the Sara Creek. Dikii settled near his host and married one of the elder's matrilineal relatives. Soon his depression gave way to a more sanguine attitude, and he began to reassert himself as a shaman.¹⁶

After a number of successful years at Maipa Ondoo (see fig. 7, ch. 5), Dikii again encountered distrust. One of his patients died, and he was accused of having killed her. Now Dikii's affines forced him to

undergo the Sweli ordeal again. They brought him back to the Tapanahoni where the familiar sequence of events unfolded once more. He was again made the laughing stock of Tapanahoni society, subjected to Sweli's priests, and treated in a degrading manner. Once again he was made to endure the ordeal, once again he survived, and once again he had to be released. But this renewed humiliation and gossip plunged him into a dark depression. After he returned to Maipa Ondoo he simply sat in his house until he died, which was not long after he came back. Predictably, this was interpreted as proof of all the earlier accusations and as a manifestation of Sweli Gadu's final revenge upon this witch. The verdict of the gravediggers was that Dikii's death was of the gadu dede type. The names of the most prominent among the olo-man are still remembered today,¹⁷ demonstrating that "records" of such events are indeed kept. It was realized at the time that any inquest into Dikii's death would arouse great interest. The names of the corpse bearers and their matrilineages were passed on in oral tradition so that if anything should go wrong—if a fraudulent sentence was ever alleged—the responsible clans could be held to account. (That hour of reckoning would come two generations later.)

Dikii's body was left unburied, like that of any other witch. In denying Dikii a proper burial, the gravediggers faithfully executed one of Sweli's commandments. But in another respect they deepened the crisis. They did not bring Dikii's estate to Diitabiki, as they should have done, but kept his riches for themselves. They also failed to offer Dikii's matriclan, the Pinasi, a modest share of Dikii's wealth, something that should have been done even in a witchcraft case. Generations later the Pinasi and their allies still chafe at this grave injustice: people not related by blood had usurped Dikii's inheritance.¹⁸ Meanwhile those who had felt legally entitled to Dikii's effects, the two clans managing the Sweli ordeal (Otoo and Misidyan) complain today that "the only thing we ever received from Dikii's estate were his clothes; those we brought to Saantigoon."¹⁹ Just about everything that could go wrong with the Dikii affair did go wrong. His clansmen hold the Sweli priests as responsible as their accomplices on the Sara Creek, the gravediggers who carried the corpse. Moreover, his own clan received none of his legacy. In their turn, the Sweli priests accused the people of the Sara Creek of cheating: "they only sent us his clothes!"

Whenever grievances of this type are being voiced, one can be sure that, sooner or later, the case will be reopened. Consequently, the names of all the individual gravediggers who carried the corpse during the decisive last stage of divination were duly passed to later generations. Revenge would come. Dikii's Yooka, infuriated at the in-laws who had begrudged him his affluence when he lived and who stole his possessions after he died, was expected to see to it that their descendants would pay heavily for the insults and injustices.

Epilogue: Dikii, the Bounty Hunter

Our six tales are based on oral testimony. But there is also archival material that appears to shed light on Dikii's life. Not surprisingly, Dutch colonial society was completely unaware of Dikii's exploits as shaman. And even if the whites had had a chance to know about what happened on the far-away Tapanahoni, they wouldn't have been interested in the life of this extraordinary shaman. But the colonial authorities in charge of security had every reason to be interested in Dikii.

Dutch archives offer us clear indications that the Dutch authorities had hired Dikii to hunt for Runaways. In return for considerable financial remuneration a man they called Dicki Pambu hunted down Runaways during the 1830s. Here is our evidence: Oral historians assert that a seriously depressed Dikii roamed through the forests north of the Tapanahoni. After having the poison ordeal inflicted on him twice, he had every reason to be depressed. However, such trekking through the wilderness without any clear purpose is most unusual among Ndyuka and their shamans. Perhaps there is another explanation; perhaps Dikii had a reason to be in that area. What we know for sure is that during the 1830s a Ndyuka man by the name of Dicki Pambu earned himself a reputation for organizing raids against settlements of bakabusi sama (new Runaways or "backwoods people"). Dicki Pambu's field of operation was the Surnau Creek, some thirty miles from Paramaribo. Was this Dicki the same person as the shaman Dikii? Neither Dicki nor Dikii are common names among Ndyuka, nor do the colonial records mention any other Ndyuka called Dicki. Tellingly, the best known of Dikii's nicknames was "A Pambu Dyeke" which referred to the way Dikii used to wear his *kamisa* (breechcloth), the traditional garment for Ndyuka males.²⁰ Archival data further support our conjectures. Government officials stated that Dicki Pambu was a Ndyuka. Moreover, anyone leading such dangerous slavehunts could not attract followers unless he were well-versed in the knowledge of obiya. There is thus a good chance that Dikii the notorious shaman is the same as Dicki Pambu the person who hunted Runaways.²¹

Notes

¹ Akalali assumed leadership of what is known among theologians and historians as an antinomian cult. *The Chambers Dictionary* (1993:68) defines a person as antinomian when he denies the obligations of moral law. Cohn's work (1970, 1975) has given us many examples of antinomian cults in Medieval Europe.

² Our source was Da Akalali, Loabi village, Pataa clan. Akalali was Danger's medium from 1972 until his death in 1983. Akalali went out of his way to teach us the fundamentals of the Danger creed. These conversations took place between 1973 and 1980. Other Ndyuka, from various other clans, both adherents and opponents of the Gaan Tata priesthood, have given us almost identical versions of the same myth. The myth, "A Boat Moving Effortlessly Upstream," is widespread among the Afro-Surinamese population (see Stephen 1986:56–57). According to Stephen, a Creole shaman pres-

ently working in the Netherlands, the boat was able to move upstream without any human effort because *watra mama*, the divine mermaid, pushed it. The Ndyuka don't acknowledge that interpretation.

- ³ Source: Da Kelema, Diitabiki village, Misidyan clan, interviewed in 1977. Kiyoo Kondee is fixed in Ndyuka historical thinking as the place where "The Twelve Clans" first reached the Tapanahoni River. Kiyoo Kondee is considered by many to be the place from where the Ndyuka spread over the Tapanahoni region. Erroneously so, Pakosie (1999:34) has argued.
- ⁴ In addition to oral history accounts the name Gaan Udu is also mentioned in an unpublished manuscript by Helstone (1912).
- ⁵ Historians agree that Dikii was the first child born in the village of Katina Sófia. The village is never mentioned in eighteenth-century Dutch government reports but does appear in early nineteenth-century reports. Dikii was still alive when Gaanman Man-yan Beeyman died in 1866 (Pakosie 1999:53). At that time he had settled among Sara Creek Ndyuka, in the last phase of his life. On the basis of such data we approximate that Dikii lived between 1800 and about 1870.
- ⁶ Ogii's prophet, Akalali himself, first told us this myth. Many variants exist, but they all indicate that the two women acted thoughtlessly. The husband, naturally of a different lineage, is portrayed as an opportunist.
- ⁷ Most of these myths are so widely shared as to be almost a cultural property of all Ndyuka. But the "feces eating" part is rejected by some of Ogii's followers as a fabrication by their enemies.
- ⁸ Source: André Pakosie, Loabi village, Pinasi clan.
- ⁹ Source: André Pakosie, Loabi village, Pinasi clan.
- ¹⁰ Today the island has a shrine for Ogii; it is opposite Dikii's ancient village, now abandoned.
- ¹¹ Source: André Pakosie, Loabi village, Pinasi clan.
- ¹² Source: Da Afanyaka, Puketi village, Otoo clan.
- ¹³ Source: Akalali.
- ¹⁴ Sources: Asawooko, Diitabiki village, Misidyan clan, and Da Akula, Kisai village, Pikaan clan.
- ¹⁵ Source: Akalali. This report is original with Akalali. We have never heard from anyone else about Europeans teaming up with Sweli's priests to bring suspects, such as Dikii, to the poison ordeal. All evidence points the other way, because if there was one thing colonial authorities did not like, it was Maroons executing death sentences. Whenever they learned that Maroons planned to appropriate the colonial government's ultimate prerogative, capital punishment, the Dutch attempted to intervene. Nevertheless, this theme of European complicity in what many considered to be the fraudulent work of the Sweli priests, keeps recurring. Also, the theme of the Great War having been unleashed by Ogii as punishment for Europeans' sins, is an integral part of the gospel of Ogii's prophets.
- ¹⁶ Source: Akoyoo Dauwsi, Sanbedumi village, Pinasi clan.
- ¹⁷ Of the Ansu clan, Da Akusian took part, while Da Nengee Suwagi and Da Jonatsi accepted responsibility for the Misidyan. Several Ndyuka historians related this to us. An outline of this story can also be found in Helstone's (1912) manuscript.
- ¹⁸ Our sources here are historians from the Dyu, Misidyan, and Otoo clans.
- ¹⁹ Source: Da Bono, Diitabiki village, Otoo clan.
- ²⁰ Source: André Pakosie, Loabi village, Pinasi clan. According to Pakosie (1999:23) the full name of Dikii was "Dikii Pambu Kwaami." "Kwaami" is a name given to everyone born on Saturday. Kwaami as in *A Ogii kwaami* means "Evil got hold of me." "Dikii was as peculiar in dress as in everything else, wearing the kamisa like no other Ndyuka did.
- ²¹ Ndyuka sources are explicit about his wanderings through the forest, but volunteer no information on Dikii as slave hunter. We often asked people what Dikii was doing while trekking through the forest. People claimed not to know, and they might very

well have no knowledge about any such activities. A "Dicki" or "Dicki Pambu" appears in the following archival documents: ARA NWJ 804, no. 5020, November 4, 1830, ARA NWJ 807, no. 5020, October 26, 1830; ARA NWJ, no. 61, January 28, 1831; ARA NWJ 808, no. 22a, January 11, 1833. We are indebted to Wim Hoogbergen for providing us with these references.

The Return of Dikii

TIGER CATS

By 1905 many Ndyuka had grown disenchanted with their new religion, the Gaan Tata cult. Fifteen years after its priests first proselytized among Maroons, the novelty of the new creed had worn off and people were having second thoughts. In 1908, Helstone, a Moravian missionary (1908–1914), recorded the words of elders who returned to the Cottica after visiting Gaan Tata's main shrines on the Tapanahoni, deeply disillusioned at their experiences in the Ndyuka heartland. While they were staying with relatives in Godoolo, the constant playing of concertinas—the latest craze—had attracted a tiger cat. The elders claimed that the beast had crept up on the dancers only to suddenly join them, swinging to the rhythm, clearly visible to the terrified crowd. Before it left, it had killed every chicken and dog in the village. Similar events involving unnatural animals were reported from other Tapanahoni villages. Shocked, the Cottica visitors admitted having grave misgivings about their god: how could such outlandish things have happened in Gaan Tata's own stronghold? In 1908, and in the presence of some Gaan Tata priests, one elder explained how he felt about these strange events:

Ndyuka society is falling apart. Evil things are emerging from the bush and entering the village to dance with human beings. . . . Not only did people run away because they were terrified [by the dancing tiger cat] but also because they couldn't stand the tiger's smell

any longer. They said its stench was so horrible that people couldn't breathe. . . . Never since I was born have I heard or seen anything like it. And this is going on right there in the Tapanahoni region, where the roots of our faith are. . . . (cited in Helstone 1908–1914)

The travelers, looking around at Agiti Ondoo, the center of Gaan Tata worship on the Cottica River,¹ could not help but regard the leprosy of Gaan Tata's local High Priest in the light of their Tapanahoni experiences: "Look at the owner (meaning, the custodian) of our Gaan Tata shrine; his fingers and toes are so rotten they are about to fall off. Why couldn't the deity have put a stop to that rot?" (Helstone 1908–1914).

Whether or not tiger cats or other monsters actually did put in such dramatic appearances in Tapanahoni villages is a question that need not detain us. It is the symbolic implication of these reports that is interesting. Obviously, in 1908, these Ndyuka felt that powerful forces were impinging upon them. The boundary between bush and village—separating dangerous untamed forces from social order—had somehow grown porous. Apparently neither the human community nor Gaan Tata was strong enough to protect them from chaos.

CLIMBING MOUNT TEBU

Da Labi Agumasaka (Saka) knew that his empire was under siege. For Gaan Tata's High Priest, the unquestioned dominance of the 1890s had ended, and he had to contend with new forces. In Godoolo village, only hours away from his Gaanboli bulwark, religious specialists were already experimenting with a rebirth of the Papagadu or Vodou cult, a spirit medium society that had suffered greatly from the Coba Inquiries and their aftermath. Saka knew he had to regain the initiative. The following account, based on both written history and oral testimony, reflects this.

During the opening years of the twentieth century, the Dutch colonial administration and several (mostly government-sponsored) societies for the promotion of scientific research combined resources to explore Suriname's southern region, which borders on Brazil. One of these expeditions, under the leadership of Claudius de Goeje, a naval officer, was conducted in 1907. De Goeje chose a route following the Marowijne River and then the Tapanahoni until its headwaters were reached. Ndyuka leaders were apprehensive about the outcome of this planned reconnaissance, for it would afford the Dutch a clear picture of the Ndyuka's "backyard," the vast hinterland that was to be their refuge in case armed hostilities with the whites were ever to be resumed. Moreover, the Trio and Oyana, Amerindian tribes living in the region, could then enter into direct communication with the colonial authorities, thereby eliminating the Ndyuka's profitable position as middlemen in the Indians' trade with the coastal population.

The colonial authorities, knowing the Ndyuka were opposed to any expedition and would try to impede it, sent a few officials ahead to warn Gaanman Oseyse against any attempt to obstruct the enterprise. They demanded his public endorsement of the expedition's aims. When the Gaanman stalled, he was summoned to Paramaribo to pledge his support for the undertaking (de Goeje 1908:34–35). Still, when the expedition arrived at Diitabiki, the Ndyuka managed to delay it for a few days. Pressure was increased, and after a spate of Gaan Tata consultations, the elders finally gave in. De Goeje proceeded upstream. But at Gaanboli a new round of sabotage, engineered by Saka's assistants, forced de Goeje to delay his departure for the headwaters of the Tapanahoni. During those few days, Saka and de Goeje met often and talked amicably about, among other things, the history of the Ndyuka people (de Goeje 1908:66). Thereafter, de Goeje was allowed to proceed with his expedition.

A couple of days upstream from Gaanboli, de Goeje climbed Tebu. Although this mountain is only 400 meters high, its steep, bare, granite slopes tower impressively over the surrounding forest. The climbing of Tebu caused the Ndyuka boatmen who worked for the expedition to wonder what this important official was seeking on the mountain's naked top. Something valuable had to be waiting there; whites were not known for wasting time on silly trips. Oral testimony indicates the outcome of their ruminations:

A long time ago, when Mister de Kwee (de Goeje) stayed for a few days at Gaanboli, he and Da Saka had many confidential talks. In return for Da Saka's help in overcoming people's resistance against the expedition, de Kwee revealed to him that he was going to collect part of an obiya lying near the top of Mount Tebu. De Kwee advised Father Saka to do likewise; there would be enough for both of them. They were now such good friends! De Kwee revealed that the obiya he was looking for on Tebu was a Papagadu obiya, but one of an unknown type that was immensely superior to any known one. Da Tebu—for that was the obiya's name—could easily rank with the largest obiya and spirits. Only Masaa Gadu was more powerful.

Da Saka liked the idea. But while he was getting ready for his trip to Tebu, the Papagadu priests at Godoolo got wind of what these two great men had been discussing. There was so much spying and betrayal in those days! The Papagadu priests of Godoolo finished their preparations before Da Saka had completed his. They had geared themselves up for the dangerous ascent with traditional potions made from Papa[gadu] medicinal plants. But such minor obiya were not much help for getting in touch with Da Tebu. That required a quite different *seeka* [preparation]! When the Godoolo priests were climbing Mount Tebu, an earthquake struck. Terrified, they scrambled down the exposed flanks of the moun-

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tain, fleeing into the forest below. That ended their expedition. They never tried again.

Now it was Da Saka's turn. He was a clever man; he knew this wasn't going to be easy. Da Saka first consulted Gaan Tata, asking him: "When we climb Mount Tebu, will we find the obiya?" Gaan Tata replied that the expedition could become a great success, if



Figure 17 High Priest Saka and de Goeje in 1907.
(Source: de Goeje, 1908)

handled properly. What they had to do was to indulge the new deity's aesthetic preferences. Da Tebu loved red, white, and chequered cloths, Gaan Tata disclosed. Fastened to poles like flags, such pieces of fabric would humor the deity and make him amenable to human requests. Above all, as with any other obiya, Saka and his following would have to observe the obiya's commandments. First, after any death in Gaanboli, the body of the deceased would have to be brought to Diitabiki for corpse divination and other funerary rites. Second, no guns were ever to be fired in the village of Gaanboli. [The firing of rifles in the village by gravediggers is normally an essential part of funerary rites. The shots are fired only for a "respectable" death.] Third, Gaan Tata warned, drums must not be played in Gaanboli. The *agida* [a tall drum to which Papa-gadu mediums prefer to dance] was the only exception to this rule.

Confident that they could adhere to these regulations, Da Saka and his children decided to go ahead with the expedition. They traveled upstream until they reached a small island from where Mount Tebu could be seen. They flew flags—red, white, and chequered—all over the island in full view of the deity residing on the mountaintop. Then Da Saka and his following crossed the river toward Mount Tebu and repeated the flag hoisting. They cut a path to link the Tapanahoni River with the mountain. At its foot, Da Saka pitched camp, again decorating it with the flags as Gaan Tata had instructed.

Now sufficiently honored, Da Tebu allowed them to make the ascent. Halfway up the mountain slope prayers were renewed, and two of Da Saka's most trusted followers were sent to scout a route to the top. These were Da Yangaman Velanti and Sa Mali, Da Saka's daughter. The latter represented a problem because Tebu's peak was taboo for women. Fortunately, Da Saka knew how to mollify the spirit by making the right offerings. Da Velanti and Sa Mali were approved to resume the ascent. Near the summit, Da Tebu demanded one last offering: the colorful chequered cloth Da Velanti was wearing as a *putukele* [stole]. Regretfully Da Velanti parted with it, hoisting it on a pole to please the deity. They could then climb the final meters to the top without further delay.

When they arrived, they saw a beautiful stone lying in front of them. They realized that this must be Da Tebu's tabernacle, the domicile of the spirit of the mountaintop. Da Velanti took a cloth, wrapped the stone in it, picked up Da Tebu, and began the descent. At regular intervals, prayers were said and offerings made. [Our source listed a large number of spots where offerings were made during that descent.]

On their return to Gaanboli, more prayers were said and libations poured while the deity was cajoled into relaxing its stringent regulations. After many prayers and offerings, Da Tebu permitted Gaanboli's people to fire rifles in the village. But no other concessions were ever granted. When Ma Pela, another of Da Saka's daughters, died, the bearers of her corpse were petrified in place and could not move an inch. People understood that Da Tebu's

position on corpse divination in Gaanboli had not softened. Ma Pela's body was brought to Diitabiki for the inquest and burial. This custom has remained obligatory until today.²

Since then, Gaanboli has been known as a village with two important oracles in residence: Gaan Tata and Da Tebu. The immediate effect of Saka's expedition to Mount Tebu was the initiation of another Papagadu center in the Tapanahoni region, rival to the one in Godoolo that, in the eyes of Gaan Tata's priests, had become far too popular.

THE RETURN OF DIKII

It took a stranger, a Saamaka by the name of Gbalo, to mobilize the growing disillusionment with Gaan Tata into a countermovement. Gbalo was a notorious figure, both for his shamanistic powers and his carnal appetites. He caused outrage by willfully breaking taboos and indiscriminately pursuing women regardless of their kinship and age. Once he seized a young girl, a cousin, and threw her over his shoulder, carrying her off into the forest. The girl screamed at the top of her lungs: "*A ta tyai mi kule.*" ("He is carrying me away; he is abducting me.") From then on Gbalo was known as Atyaimikule, or Akule for short.

Akule's position in his natal community became untenable once rumors began to circulate that he kept company with malevolent bush spirits. He fled from his village on the Gaanlió, a tributary of the Suriname River, to another Saamaka village more than a hundred miles downstream. But after managing to create more scandals there, he was forced to flee again. He sought and was finally granted asylum among the Ndyuka of the Sara Creek. Some elders there objected to his presence, stating that any man who stood accused by his own people of sexual assault, incest, and witchcraft should not be welcome in a Ndyuka village. But others argued that any man in contact with powerful supernatural forces could prove useful to the sick, especially in times of adversity. The latter opinion prevailed, and for a number of years Akule lived inconspicuously in the village of Maipa Ondoo as a known and respected Ampuku shaman. He married a woman of the same lineage that had once welcomed Dikii and had given him a wife in marriage, but that had later betrayed him. Jonatasi, the gravedigger most responsible for Dikii's posthumous condemnation, was Dikii's wife's mother's brother. But these events occurred half a century before Akule's arrival, and Jonatasi had died many years earlier. Everything seemed to be working out for Akule.

But then his wife fell ill. Rumors started spreading about this Saamaka stranger and his evil history: perhaps he was responsible for his wife's illness? Akule (as we understand his situation from oral traditions) had only three alternatives: (1) He could leave Maipa Ondoo and the Sara Creek region. But that would mean continuing to live under

a cloud, unwelcome in any Saamaka or Ndyuka village. (2) He could surrender himself to the Sweli Gadu priests on the Tapanahoni. But after what they did to Dikii, why would he do so voluntarily? (3) He could present himself as Dikii's medium. Being married to a woman from Jonatasi's lineage, Akule must have known Dikii's story inside out and have been familiar with the growing doubts about Dikii's inquest. Our conjecture is that Akule, consciously or not, recognized that the third choice offered him the greatest opportunities at the least risk. In any case, this is how Ndyuka tell the story:

Fighting with Dikii's Ghost

When Akule's wife contracted a disease that appeared to be incurable, it was attributed to the anger of Dikii's ghost, because Dikii happened to be the woman's great grandfather. On being told that Maipa Ondoo's elders had so divined the cause of her illness, Akule set himself the task of bringing about his wife's recovery. Day after day, he took her to a forest shrine, a place quite near the bamboo grove where, some decades earlier, Dikii's corpse had been left to rot. Akule brought a club, an *awidya* [a fly whisk],³ a gun, and obiya to the spot where the remedy was to be applied. He arranged all his paraphernalia with the greatest care and then, with the club in one hand and the *awidya* in the other, swept the place clean of dangerous influences. Seeing Dikii's spirit hovering over the bushes surrounding the shrine, he lashed out at it and managed to drive it away. He put the brush in an herbal mixture, added water, and then sprinkled the place to keep the harmful forces at bay. Only after these precautions had been taken, could the remedy—ablutions with that same herbal mixture—be applied. And so he continued, day after day, until he felt Dikii's ghost was ready to be resurrected.

On that day, Akule went about his work in a slightly different way: he kept his gun at his side, along with some objects for conjuring up spirits. He then summoned Dikii's ghost. When the Yooka appeared. Akule, "with lustrous eyes," was lying in wait. Seeing the ghost moving in his direction, he aimed and fired, but unfortunately, he missed. The spirit yelled at him: "You didn't get me! Now I get you!" and invaded Akule, to abide with him until his death.

Our source for the account above, Da Kelema of Diitabiki, corroborated Helstone's (1912) account (presented below) of Akule's spirit seizure. Except for a few changes in wording, the stories are essentially identical.

One day Akule gathered his obiya and went to the bamboo grove where Dikii's corpse had been abandoned. There, Dikii's spirit started fighting with Akule. The spirit caught him and bound him to his own *Muvungu* obiya [a subvariety of Ampuku]. Once it had him trussed, it invaded him. People learned about this when Akule returned from the forest. Through his mouth the spirit shouted, "I am Dikii!" Everything was now clear to the people of Maipa Ondoo.⁴

Ndyuka historians ascribe two motives to Dikii's ghost. First, by invading a human being, Dikii could take revenge on the descendants of those who had falsely accused him of witchcraft and who were therefore responsible for his subsequent suffering. Second, he could exact retribution from those who had stolen his possessions. The belief that the ghost of a person who died as a result of injustice will return to seek vengeance on those responsible, or their descendants, was and remains a fundamental religious doctrine. The traditional *modus operandi* of such a kunu is to inflict adversity, sickness, and death until finally, after having been duly propitiated, he may contain or even remedy some of the damage he has done. After achieving these goals, Dikii's ghost could thus be expected to allow himself to be mollified and then undo some of the worst effects of his wrath. But people soon began to understand that Akule's mediumship was more complicated than that.

THE DIVINE COUNCIL INTERVENES

Akule did not stop at assuming the position of supreme arbiter on matters of guilt and punishment in the Dikii case, something that would have concerned only a few lineages of the Ansu and Misidyan clans. Instead, Akule asserted that the religious iniquities introduced by Gaan Tata's servants had created more than a single, wrathful kunu. Gaan Tata's priests had gone so far beyond the limits of the commission granted them, and their depravity had reached such proportions, that the Supreme Being could not longer stand idly by. A divine council had been convened, comprised of Masaa Gadu and a number of unspecified supernatural agencies of the first rank.

This divine palaver sent a yeye, a spirit that took possession of Akule. A yeye resembles the angel of Christian theology; it is sent for one specific task. It differs from a Christian angel in that a yeye's mission is even more circumscribed: its task is to restore order to a corrupt world. This plenipotentiary would first castigate the Ndyuka for submitting to Gaan Tata's corrupt priests, but after punishment had been inflicted, the yeye would help them resume the life they were entitled to, a life of liberty and plenitude.⁵ In this way, another novel theological recombination was achieved: for the first time a kunu (Dikii's ghost) came to be linked with a yeye, a spirit sent by the highest supernaturals to restore order.

The belief that human failures and sins create a state of danger that makes divine intervention imminent was as accepted then as it is today. The standard explanation for every misfortune afflicting the community, from illness and death to scarcity of game and poor harvests, is that divine favor is being withheld because of sin. *Goontapu poli* (society has been corrupted) was and still is a standard lamentation in Maroon culture.

AKULE'S BID FOR POWER

Akule transformed Maipa Ondoo into a cult center, attracting hundreds of followers. He threatened opponents with death while reducing the more docile to servility. The elders of the Sara Creek region offered him a *pee pikadu*, a great feast of atonement that took months to complete. Palavers were held, seances rendered public recognition to the new medium, and lavish food offerings were made to Dikii and other Pinasi ancestors. At night, great traditional dances honored and humored the ancestors. This feast, offered to the deity around 1905, marked the beginning of Akule's public career as a prophet. Elders from the Pinasi clan traveled to the Sara Creek region to check the new medium's credentials. After interrogating the spirit, they ended up convinced, authenticating Akule as medium of both Dikii and Ogii.

Thereafter Akule directed all his efforts to the Ndyuka in their Tapanahoni heartland and their major settlements in the Cottica region. The first wave of enthusiasm emboldened the prophet to hurl accusations at the Gaan Tata oracles there. Messages were sent to the priests, notifying them that the hour of reckoning had arrived: Dikii's ghost had returned to exact retribution and Ogii, enraged by the sacrilege of Saantigoon, had merged his powers with those of the kunu. Akule claimed that Gaan Tata's priests, under the leadership of Saka, were directly responsible.

After putting out a few feelers, Akule dispatched a delegation to the Tapanahoni under the leadership of a trusted deputy. The delegation brought an ultimatum: Chief Oseyse must forthwith recognize Akule as medium for both Dikii and Ogii or the deity would visit sickness and death on all who opposed him. The divine threats were serious: Dikii's ghost would have free rein to avenge itself, and forest spirits would be alerted to human prey. Another dimension was added when Akule's deputy announced that Ogii was operating as Masaa Gadu's plenipotentiary, as a restorer spirit. Akule's message was that Maroon societies had gone haywire, and that it was the yeye's aim to redress that situation. This yeye, he asserted, would restore the earth's fertility, and the land would again be as good a place to live as it was in days gone by. Sickness and death would be drastically reduced or completely eliminated from those happy few who deserved the good life. As a necessary precondition, the restorer spirit would have to eliminate the small group of sinners who had been responsible for society's fall from grace. Akule considered the Gaan Tata priests the worst sinners because they had brought corruption to a world where purity once reigned.⁶ Naturally there was great consternation in Gaan Tata's priesthood. The following is one account of what happened when the news was received at Gaan Tata's oracle at Gaanboli.

Early one morning a tiger cat assaulted Abumataki, one of the best hunting dogs of its day. The incident occurred at the forest's edge. The dog managed to escape to safety. The matter was immediately referred to Saka, and the dog was brought before Da Lebi Koosi. The deity alerted humans to the fact that Ogii, disguised as a tiger cat, was prowling around Gaan Tata's bastion. A messenger was forthwith dispatched to Diitabiki, warning Oseyse of impending danger.⁷

Saka's grandsons, Da Amoikudu and Da Amatali, credit their grandfather for neutralizing Ogii:

Father Saka was among the first of his generation to see the visible form of Ogii. This Thing was sitting in a small boat that moved upstream without any apparent effort. It looked like an Amerindian.⁸ Saka took the Thing to Saantigoon and gave it a seeka, a ritual bath to split off Ogii's evil side. Saka promised the purified Ogii that the gadu would no longer need to eat human corpses, he would see to it that appropriate quantities of valuables would be brought to Saantigoon, the forest sanctuary.⁹

Wasi en paati (splitting off the evil side) is standard treatment for any neophyte seeking acceptance as the authentic medium of a particular spirit. On a social level, this ritual intervention was meant to establish a hierarchical relationship between Saka, Gaan Tata's High Priest, and Ogii's adepts. We doubt, however, that this mythical account was given much credence outside a small clique of Gaan Tata followers.

TRIUMPH ON THE COTTICA

It was in 1910, among Ndyuka of the Cottica River, that Akule enjoyed the crowning success of his career. When Fania, the local subchief for the Cottica, died in 1909, Akule recognized a splendid opportunity. First, he claimed to have killed this Gaan Tata stalwart, then he moved into his territory before a successor could be appointed. What followed was a replay of the events in the Sara Creek region, only on a larger scale, and without much opposition. In June 1910, after a few weeks of negotiations (MM, June 1910), the Cottica Ndyuka sent eight boats to Paramaribo to collect Akule and his considerable entourage. Beginning on the day of his arrival, great feasts in honor of Ogii were held, lasting for weeks and postponing the work of clearing new gardens until the second part of October, when the rainy season starts in earnest. The entire Cottica region had become Akule's domain. Assisted by his foster son Gaando, whom he had ordered to leave his Tapanahoni village and join him, Akule ruled the region as a god-king.

The early Ogii movement was a despotic cult. Akule and Gaando demanded absolute obedience, were revered as gods, and behaved as

tyrants. Fines from 10 to 25 guilders (4–10 U.S. dollars—a fortune in those days) or goods (30 eggs is an example mentioned) were levied for minor infractions of Akule's rules (Barth 1910). While Akule kept people from working their own fields for most of the dry season, he ordered 70 to 80 men to cut gardens for himself and his wives. A deputy brought back those who tried furtively to work their own plots; they were subsequently detained (BHW 1912:4). Those who disobeyed such commands were threatened with death. Akule himself claimed to have killed many contemporaries, some prestigious and powerful, others ordinary citizens who had aroused his displeasure. He claimed, for example, to be responsible for the death of Gaan Tata's custodians at the shrines at Agiti Ondoo and at Kiiki Pandasi on the Sara Creek. He also claimed to have killed the Reverend Father Ernst Reichel, the Moravian Church's director of overseas missionary work, who drowned during a storm in the Gulf of Biscay in January 1910 (Weiss 1911:161).

Every sickness and every death was attributed to Akule's spirit (BHW 1912:1), although the precise type of supernatural agent (ghost, avenging spirit, restorer spirit) was seldom specified. Akule was held responsible for the injuries a young man suffered when clearing his garden (Müller 1910). When the son of a village headman was killed felling trees, corpse divination taught people that Akule was responsible. A delegation was sent to Akule's house to ask him respectfully whether he had in fact caused the young man's death. Akule confirmed this and added that the headman's second son would also die in the near future, and that this death would be his doing as well, meaning that his possessing spirit would take care of that problem. Shortly thereafter, an accident did indeed end the life of the second son, and faith in Akule's powers grew beyond bounds (BHW 1912:4). Respect for the prophet was enormous; he was considered Ogi's avatar. People explained to the Moravian missionary residing in the area that Gaan Tata had gone blind. By contrast, Akule had answered all their questions to their full satisfaction, and moreover, he provided signs and miracles none of the old priests could deliver (BHW 1912:2). Nowadays, Tapanahoni Ndyuka claim that Akule raised two men from their graves. He stopped doing this when concerned elders warned him that practices such as these would make people wonder whether he possessed the powers of witchcraft.

Both Akule and Gaando brutally violated the rights of their new subjects, insulting some men by taking their wives or by seizing from them whatever caught their fancy. In some cases, they forced cuckolded husbands to cook a meal for the usurper and his new mistress. One man, who had reported unfavorably on Akule to the Cottica elders a few years earlier when Akule was still in the Sara Creek region, was granted the dubious privilege of playing drums for the prophet, and for such long stints that he fell ill. The populace was

reminded daily of its abject subjection. No one was allowed to move from the village without informing their new leaders. For special cases, Akule kept a prison, a small building in the middle of Gaan Tata's ritual center (Langballe 1910).

In 1910–1911, Gaando, during his stay in the Cottica village of Likanau Mofu, ordered its villagers to assemble in front of his house early every morning to receive their instructions for the day. No one was allowed to make a trip, or undertake any sort of work, without first having obtained permission from Gaando. When he emerged from his house, people would put down cloths in his path, so that his feet would not touch the earth. When someone died, the corpse, contrary to former custom, had to be removed from the village immediately. Both Akule and Gaando prided themselves on breaking Ndyuka's society's most fundamental taboos. Akule, for example, "lived with" a woman and her daughter at the same time; breaking one of the most extreme expressions of incest that Ndyuka culture recognizes. It was said of him that: "He obeys only one rule, to make sure that he enjoys life fully" (Barth 1910). Akule's successors would be guided by the same maxim.

At the end of October 1910, the District Commissioner had Akule arrested. He was kept in custody for two weeks and, after a brief stay in Paramaribo, extradited to Saamaka territory, where he died in September 1917 (MM, November 1917). Gaando managed to hold out for another year, revered as a god, commanding absolute obedience, until he too was banished from the Cottica by the colonial authorities. The charges leveled against the two men are not known to us, but it seems probable that their disruption of economic life (Barth 1910; MBB 1911: 82) weighed more heavily with the authorities than the violation of young girls (Langballe 1910) or even Akule's threat to magically kill his opponents (Helstone 1908–1914).

Ndyuka historians often resort to a "Samson betrayed by Delilah" explanation when trying to make sense of the sudden downfall of their heroes. When Akule took up residence in the village of Agiti Ondoo, his authority far exceeded that of the local headmen. The Christian missionaries, seeing their converts lapse, hatched a plot. With the help of some Ndyuka headmen, Akule was tricked into having sexual intercourse with a menstruating girl. This ended Akule's career as Ogii's medium. Ogii, however, was not emasculated. A few years after the Moravian missionary Reichel drowned—Ogii's work, the Ndyuka insist—he took revenge on the Europeans by making them butcher each other in the First World War. Still, the Ndyuka must have felt considerable ambivalence about the doings of Akule and Gaando. Helstone (1908–1914) recorded that many were of the opinion that the ghosts of all those killed by Akule were responsible for the prophet's humiliation and subsequent banishment: Gaan Tata had given them free reign to do with him as they wished.

Notes

- ¹ The Gaan Tata oracle at Agiti Ondoo was founded between 1891 and 1893 at the instigation of emissaries from Saka. Although nominally subservient to the two Tapanahoni oracles (Diitabiki and Gaanboli), it enjoyed considerable autonomy. In the vast majority of cases, the Tapanahoni oracles wouldn't know what verdicts were passed at the Cottica oracle.
- ² This account was given us by Da Amoikudu, grandson of Saka, whom we met when he was in his late eighties or early nineties.
- ³ The awidya, the fly whisk, also called the fly-switch, is used by shamans in many Central African religions. See Turner 1967:242; Turner 1981:227, Plate 12, 258; De-Boeck 1991:383; Janzen 1978:106, Plate 23. For Suriname Creole religion, see Schoffemeer (1982:33).
- ⁴ This fragment is a translation of Helstone's manuscript (1912). Akalali, Ogi's medium of the 1970s, corroborated all its salient points.
- ⁵ Helstone (1912) puts it this way: "The spirit has been sent by God to restore order in a corrupt world and proclaim a new era to all its creatures."
- ⁶ BHW 1912:2; van der Linde 1956:201–202.
- ⁷ Source: Da Amatali and Da Amoikudu, both grandsons of Da Saka. The interviews on which this and other stories are based were held in 1977, 1978, and 1979.
- ⁸ Recall, in chapter 9, Akalali's description of the initial encounter between Ndyuka and Ogi.
- ⁹ This is how the Gaanboli historians wished to render this part of history. We have collected no similar stories of Saka getting hold of Ogi among members of other groups or clans.

The Gods Parley Again

A NEW MOVEMENT

With Akule's and Gaando's banishment from the Cottica region, stability was restored along the Tapanahoni. The Gaan Tata oracles at Diitabiki and Gaanboli managed to cooperate for several years, to their mutual advantage. No further attempts were made by the Gaan Tata priesthood to suppress the spirit medium cults. Loosely organized as the latter were, they seldom presented a threat to the priests' dominance. Aggressive *obiyanan* (shamans) might be honored and even feared by the local population, but they seldom succeeded in extending their influence beyond their own villages. In 1912, after Gaando's eviction from the Cottica, the priests of Gaan Tata and Agedeonsu jointly staged feasts of celebration for their gods. Thereafter, only the Christian missions could be considered a threat to their dominance.

But these halcyon days were not to last. New forms of religious leadership began jeopardizing the hieratic establishment. During the 1910s Patu, a Pinasi from Sanbendumi, returned from French Guiana where he had been working as a transporter on the Mana River. When he was baptized in Mana town, the Catholic missionary gave Patu the name of Dominique. This Dominiki, as he came to be called, started the Tongai cult, which served a newly discovered variety of Ampuku spirits. At that time, Tongai spirits were considered to be the only pure, unadulterated, forest spirits. The cult gained many new followers, and attracted patients from all along the river. Little is remembered about these Ton-

gai today beyond that they were fashionable and contributed to the renaissance of the spirit medium cults, much as shamans had done earlier for the Papagadu cult in villages such as Gaanboli and Godoolo.

One way for a Maroon religious leader to demonstrate his ambition is to found a new village. Dominiki did just that when he settled at Akeekuna (see fig. 18), a place some five kilometers upstream from the three Godoolo villages. The founding of a village involves not just building domiciles but the raising of a faakatiki and a kee osu, because these two ritual places are essential in Maroon ancestor worship. No corpse can receive the proper ritual treatment if its community lacks such holy places. So when Dominiki transformed Akeekuna from a mere settlement into a true village, complete with prerequisite shrines, he demonstrated both his ambition and his capability. For the first time ever, a new Ndyuka religious movement would emanate from a humble forest camp.

The attraction of Akeekuna as a new spiritual center requires some clarification. Ampuku mediums had suffered most from the purges of the 1890s, and their possession cults were probably among the last to recover. At Dominiki's Akeekuna, Ampuku were not only tolerated but made the very core of religious life. The Papagadu (reptile spirits) won second place. Specialists from both cults flocked to Akeekuna, turning it into a spiritual boom town. "They made obiya to their hearts' delight," some people fondly recalled. But the reminiscences of others were less positive. The popularity of both Ampuku and Papagadu mediumship grew to cause concern and annoyance among Gaan Tata's priests. A grandson of Saka¹ put it this way:

The situation got out of hand: women were running around in trance, doing things they shouldn't have. They always seemed to be possessed by one deity or another. These mediums even flouted Gaan Tata's sacred taboo [on menstrual seclusion]. Women who should have stayed put in the *munu osu* [lit. "moon house," the menstrual seclusion hut] were running through the village. It was really most shameful. It should never have been tolerated.

The renaissance of possession cults and the revolt against the "moon house" institution are still remembered. And for good reason: both reflect the struggle of women to improve their position, and both symbolize threats to the established order. A few years earlier, tiger cats and monsters had been selected as symbols for the menace that new spiritual and social forces represented. At Akeekuna, in those early years, the events at the "moon house" were both an act of rebellion and a trigger for the unleashing of dangerous forces. They made a deep impression on Ndyuka thought, even though they probably occurred within a period not of years but of months—if not weeks. They made people so uncomfortable that before long the rule of menstrual sequestration was once again obeyed, even at Akeekuna itself.

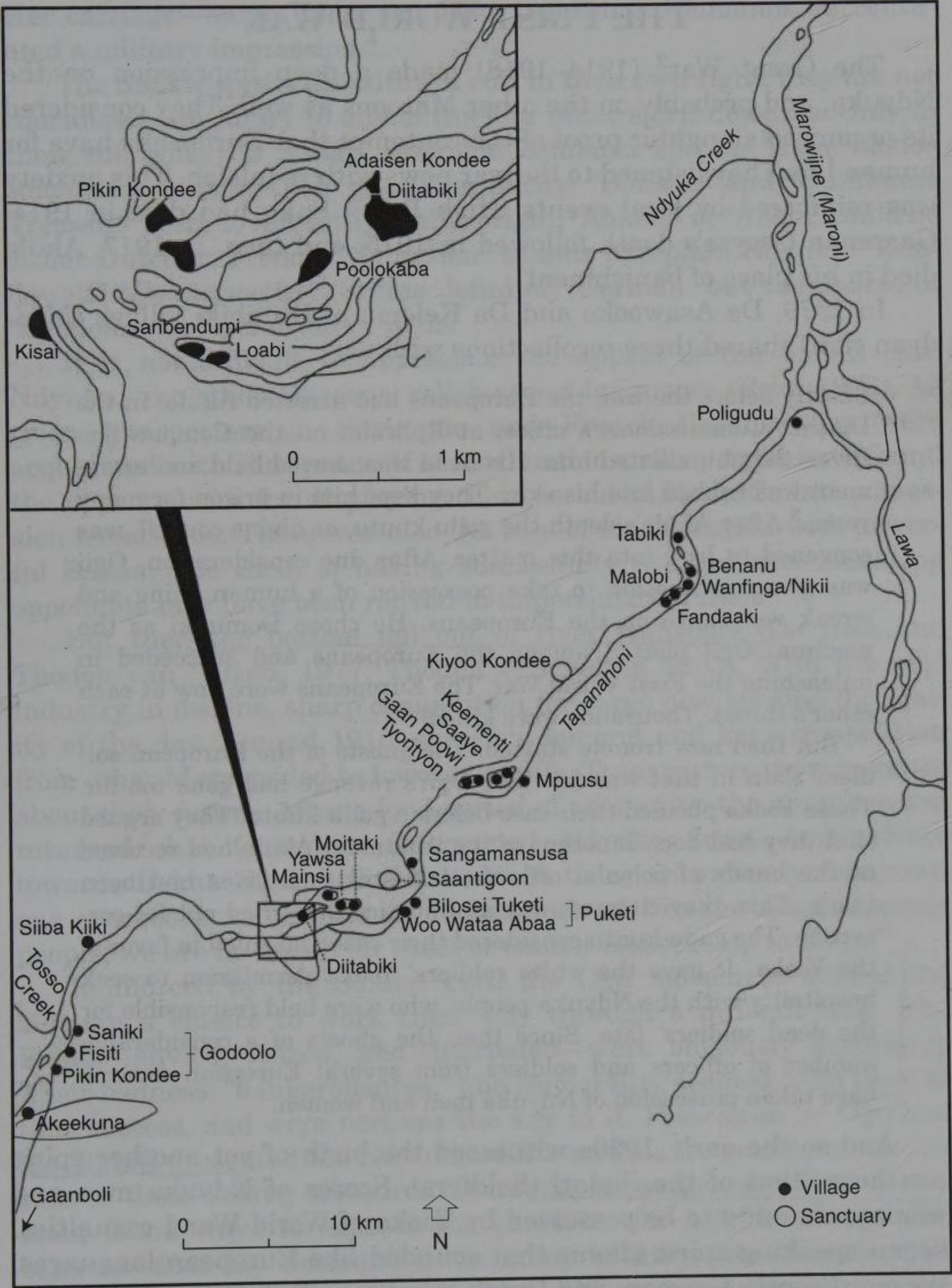


Figure 18 Ndyuka villages and sanctuaries of the Tapanahoni River, 1935.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The Great War² (1914–1918) made a deep impression on the Ndyuka, and probably on the other Maroons as well. They considered its organized slaughter proof of the contempt that Europeans have for human life. They listened to the war news with revulsion. This anxiety was reinforced by local events: High Priest Saka had died in 1914; Gaanman Oseyse's death followed in 1915, and then, in 1917, Akule died in his place of banishment.

In 1979, Da Asawooko and Da Kelema of Diitabiki village (Misi-dyan clan) shared these recollections with us:

Shortly before the war, the Europeans had arrested Akule. In the District Commissioner's office, at Ephraim on the Commewijne River, they humiliated him. His head was shaved bald and excrement was rubbed into his skin. They kept him in prison for many years.³ After Akule's death the gadu kuutu, or divine council, was convened to look into this matter. After due consideration, Ogii was given permission to take possession of a human being and wreak vengeance on the Europeans. He chose Dominiki as the medium. Ogii plotted among the Europeans and succeeded in unleashing the First World War. The Europeans were now at each other's throat. Thousands were killed!

But then new trouble started. The ghosts of the European soldiers slain in that war felt that Ogii's revenge had gone too far. These Yooka pleaded their case before a gadu kuutu. They argued that they had been innocent of the treatment Akule had received at the hands of colonial officials, but still their lives had been taken. This, they claimed, was an injustice that cried out for correction. The gadu kuutu considered their case and ruled in favor of the Yooka. It gave the white soldiers' Yooka permission to seek hospitality with the Ndyuka people, who were held responsible for the dead soldiers' fate. Since then the ghosts of a considerable number of officers and soldiers from several European nations have taken possession of Ndyuka men and women.

And so the early 1920s witnessed the birth of yet another spirit pantheon, that of the Sudati (Soldiers). Scores of Ndyuka men and women, claiming to be possessed by Yooka of World War I casualties, began speaking spirit idioms that sounded like European languages. We met French, German, and Dutch spirit manifestations. As noted in chapter 3, Kaabu, who claimed to be possessed by Dominiki's ghost and briefly acted as Ogii's medium, had been invaded by yet another spirit: the ghost of a Dutch officer. We were present when Kaabu made her debut as a medium in 1961. What struck us most at the time was her use of the appropriate spirit language. Although her words were mainly gibberish, from a distance her sacred language sounded like Dutch, and was peppered with typical Dutch curses and invectives.

Her carriage—baton under one arm, bellowing commands—accentuated a military impression.⁴

The Sudati spirits constitute a cult in their own right; they are not considered subsidiary to any of the four other spirit domains. Only in their militancy do Sudati resemble Kumanti spirits. Their names sometimes hint at their ghosts' ethnicity. "Dolisan" and "Guillaume Tressant" seem to indicate a Gallic origin; "Ankele" or "Ankel" could be either Dutch or French; "Samasien" sounds like plain Ndyuka; "Don-doweti" (*Donnerwetter*?) seems definitely German, but the source of "Apollomundo" is a mystery to us.

It is not difficult to appreciate the appeal of the Sudati cult. Ndyuka, like other Maroons, relish secret languages (Price 1976). As river transporters in Suriname and French Guiana they were acquainted with Europeans of several nations; many must have found the opportunities for displaying their verbal skills in Sudati possession irresistible. There was also the lure of identification with powerful Bakaa. The thrill of having successfully resisted once-menacing opponents may have been relived in impersonating them.

But then the bottom fell out of river transport (De Beet and Thoden van Velzen, 1977; Thoden van Velzen 2003). With the gold industry in decline, sharp competition for cargo now became the reality of the day. Around 1910, sluggish demand and keen competition from other Maroons led to lowered tariffs. Transporters grew insecure about their future. After a long period of prosperity, the apprehension returned that Outsiders determined Ndyuka fates. Ambivalence towards Bakaa became manifest. Even today, in ordinary discourse, one overhears conversational clichés such as: "Bakaa are dangerous people; we are no match for them or cannot measure up to them."⁵

Reinforced by the Soldier cult, the Ogii movement offered the Ndyuka a chance to work their way through a difficult time. The Bakaa—envied, feared, and distrusted—were obviously successful. Their badness, "dangerousness," and immorality seemed to be basic to that success, and were perhaps the key to it. Possession by Ogii and his Sudati presented the Ndyuka with a method for getting under the skin of these vexing creatures. Dominiki, an artist as well as a shaman, found ways to express the penchant for *kefaliki* (dangerous) behavior that lay dormant in so many of his contemporaries. He allowed people to explore threatening realities and the darker sides of their own nature. The Sudati blended harmoniously with existing possession cults, in particular with its closest affiliate, the Ampuku.

AKEEKUNA AS A SPIRITUAL CENTER

Akeekuna expanded rapidly once Ogii started speaking through Dominiki's mouth. This is the sequence of events: after Akule died in

November 1917, his ghost took possession of Anauwtan, who then moved his domicile to Akeekuna. We are not sure whether this happened before or after Dominiki laid claim to being Ogi's medium, but we know for certain that the two men started working together. Their motivation, like the reason that Kaabu moved to Akalali's village in the 1970s (see p. 141), appears to have been mutually beneficial: in both cases the medium of a Yooka supported the medium of a gadu.

Many other influential Ampuku shamans flocked to Akeekuna. Most notable among these was Asapoti, an obiyaman of the Sara Creek region. When news reached him about developments at Akeekuna, Asapoti left his flourishing practice to journey to the Tapanahoni with Gaando and Asoiti, Akule's former assistants. Van Lier (1944:9–11) mentions Asapoti's reputation for openly threatening his adversaries with witchcraft, a most unusual tactic in Ndyuka society. Asapoti epitomized the new breed of aggressive religious specialists who were steeped in Ampuku lore. Attracted by the boomtown atmosphere of Akeekuna, they offended their fellow citizens' sensibilities and security through abusive language, violent behavior, and most shockingly, by threats to use supernatural weapons against them—quite in contrast to what is expected from normal adult males by Ndyuka society.

Other welcome converts included Da Bossu and Da Tinde, two former assistants of Akule, and Da Salen, who had worked with Gaando at Ricanau Mofu in 1911. Fated for exceptional consequence was one Wensi, Dominiki's sister's son, who was approximately twenty years of age when he landed in Akeekuna to become one of Dominiki's new interns.

A RELIGIOUS FRONT

Dominiki's next step was to seek acceptance beyond Akeekuna. He desired recognition by Den Tualufu, "The Twelve Clans." Early in 1920, the influenza epidemic that had carried millions to their graves in Europe also brought havoc to the Ndyuka. Word came from Dominiki that the "Akeekuna deity" would take care of the emergency. While the Ndyuka were told not to travel, work their fields, fish, or move beyond the security offered by their villages, the Akeekuna gadu promised to direct all his forces toward the destruction of the evil spirits by driving them into the sea. These "evil forces" were described as "Ogi Ampuku" (evil forest spirits). From a contemporary eyewitness account, it seems that Dominiki's instructions were widely followed. Even in the Downstream area, some thirty miles from Akeekuna, people did not dare to draw water from the river for four days, for fear that they would meet with the "Ampuku devil." The Gaanman and the Gaan Tata priests at Diitabiki collaborated with Dominiki in enforcing

the injunctions, thereby illustrating the extent of the support Dominiki could now muster (van Lier diaries, April 8, 1920).

In 1922, effective cooperation was achieved among all ritual centers: Diitabiki, Akeekuna, and Tabiki and Nikii, the last two villages where Agedeonsu's shrines are located. In January of that year, Gaan Tata's oracle publicly announced its support for Ogii. As a consequence, the High Priest sent a powerful delegation to Akeekuna, attesting his active cooperation. For three months, the Diitabiki delegates added luster to the feasts at Akeekuna. One surviving member of this commission related to us his frustration at being made to stay at Akeekuna for three whole months: Dominiki, in a traditional demonstration of power, had kept them from leaving.⁶

Another sign that a "united religious front" had been established came from Godoolo, a cluster of three villages only a few kilometers downstream from Akeekuna. In February 1922, a wealthy man from Godoolo died. Surprisingly, because this was a *rich* man, he was found to be a witch during the postmortem divination. People still recall with awe that it took nineteen boats to ferry all of his estate to Diitabiki "for further distribution" by Gaan Tata's priests. That meant the man's relatives were deprived from any share in his spectacular inheritance. Undoubtedly, this verdict from Godoolo's leading gravediggers and notables reflected pressure from Dominiki: Godoolo's shamans cooperated closely with him. Our interpretation is that Dominiki yielded the estate to Diitabiki for political reasons. ✓

The religious front demonstrated its influence in areas well beyond its usual sphere of operation. Still early in 1922, the Bilo Kabiten, directed by elders who worshipped Agedeonsu, balked at recognizing the Akeekuna gadu.⁷ Only a few months later, the tide had turned: Agedeonsu's priests began defending the interests of the "Akeekuna deity." In May 1922 a palaver was held in the mainly Christian Pamaka community of Langatabiki, to ensure that its church building would be repaired without delay. This village in the central part of the Marowijne is the headquarters of Apensa, the Pamaka Gaanman. An attending missionary wrote the following account:

We were suddenly confronted with a Ndyuka delegation just then arriving. Their boat, draped with flags to which bells were attached, moored at Langatabiki's central landing. When they came ashore, it was apparent that they were heathen Bush Negroes from the Ndyuka tribe of the Tapanahoni. They addressed old Chief Apensa with the following message: "Well, Gaanman! The God Agedeonsu, who has given life to all, sends you and your people greetings. His compassion is with you and your people. This God Agedeonsu is known everywhere; even your church people talk about Him! But because He gives nourishment to all, He also wishes to have His share [of the "good life"]. Therefore He

demands that everybody, male or female, donates f. 2,50 [approximately one American dollar] and one cassava loaf to His cause. In addition, He demands that one able-bodied man shall accompany us. We'll use the money collected here to buy strong drink [rum, etc.] for libations to Agedeonsu. We also invite you to hold a religious dance for Him."⁸

Gaanman Apensa's refusal to satisfy the demands of the priestly delegation may have been due to the missionary's presence, or to a disinclination to pay tribute to Ndyuka religion, or more likely to both. Noteworthy is that the missionary who recorded this confrontation used "Akeekuna" as a synonym for Agedeonsu. Apparently the delegation also spoke on behalf of the "Akeekuna deity" (van Lier's diaries, June 1, 1922).

So by the middle of 1922 a united religious front incorporated the Tapanahoni's three main cults: Gaan Tata, Ogii, and Agedeonsu. Dominiki had accomplished his aim of working in concert with all of Ndyuka religious cults. Even today, people remark: "Dominiki was different from so many of these other leaders: Dominiki 'worked' with all clans; he didn't burn houses!"

DOMINIKI'S WEAKNESS

Dominiki reaped handsome rewards for his cooperative attitude toward the established cults. Ndyuka historians have pointed out to us that on several occasions he was granted the most cherished of prerogatives: some gods' cargoes were redirected to *his* village. How many times this happened is not clear, but the fact that it occurred at all signifies his influence. We have also heard that, on at least one occasion, Dominiki was allowed to hold a diingi sweli (oath taking). Those rites were a prerogative that the Otoo clan and their allies at Diitabiki had jealously guarded for ages. Impressive though these concessions by Gaan Tata's priesthood may have been, they were often not voluntary. Several historians stress that when Wensi (see chapter 12) destroyed Dominiki's shrines in 1932, there were many who cheered his downfall, including Diitabiki's priests.

Even during the 1920s, when opposition to Dominiki was insignificant, his power base should not be overestimated. No matter how spectacular some of his successes were, we must bear in mind that Dominiki lacked police or military powers. Moreover, he had never been recognized by the colonial government, which was only vaguely aware of his existence. His only source of influence was his claim to be Ogii's horse (*asi*), a claim widely supported among Ndyuka during the 1920s. Quite frequently, and certainly after the first years of adulation, incidents occurred that demonstrated his vulnerability, or that of his most prestigious supporters (see Thoden van Velzen and van

Wetering 1988:247–250). Gaan Tata's priests never constituted a real threat to him, but one day it fell to Wensi—his nephew, his intimate collaborator, and his trusted tax collector—to reduce him within a few hours to pathetic insignificance.

Notes

- ¹ Da Amatali, quoted in Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 1998:227.
- ² For good reasons Ndyuka considered this to be a European war and not a world war. Almost all the fighting took place in Europe, and the pictures of trenches and casualties they saw were taken in Europe. That black soldiers were also recruited to join the European armies only increased their feelings of anxiety.
- ³ Actually he was kept under house arrest in Paramaribo before being banished to a Saamaka village.
- ⁴ The Netherlands were neutral during the First World War. But when seen from the Tapanahoni, all Europeans, including the Dutch, suffer from a fatal proclivity to violence and war.
- ⁵ "*Bakaa na ogii sama; i ampoi anga den!*"
- ⁶ The chronology used here was not easy to ascertain. But we know that a person named Jangaman was a member of the delegation. Jangaman died in Albina, on the Coast, in August 1923. His protracted stay at Akeekuna can therefore be placed either in the first half of 1923 or, more likely, in 1922.
- ⁷ Gaan Tata's oracle spoke in favor of a recognition of the Akeekuna deity on January 14, 1922 (see entry in van Lier's diary for that day). The Agedeonsu oracle was then opposed to such a move (see also de Groot 1969:145). But soon Captain Popo of Benanu, an influential priest at the Agedeonsu oracle, called on all Ndyuka living in the Downstream area to participate in a religious dance in honor of "Akeekuna Gadu." The visit by Agedeonsu's priests to Diitabiki on June 17, 1922, also indicates that fences had been mended and that Agedeonsu's staff had decided to follow Diitabiki's policy of religious cooperation with Dominiki.
- ⁸ Source: Jaarverslag EBG 1922; ZZG archive, National Archives, Utrecht.

Wensi

Destroyer and Experimenter

PROPHET ON THE RUN

It is the operating premise of this book that the tug-of-war between the priests of Gaan Tata and those of Ogii presents a framework for understanding much of Ndyuka history. Consequently we have focused on only two of the Ndyuka's three main religious movements, keeping the important Agedeonsu cult's priests from putting in an appearance until the previous chapter.¹ Now, to illustrate that under certain conditions still other prophets and religious movements can capture the Ndyuka's fancy and reorganize society, we will devote a few pages to the remarkable Wensi.

During the first months of 1932, Dominiki received disturbing news about Wensi, his sister's child. Wensi was known at Akeekuna as Dominiki's *kineki* (trusted assistant). The young man had gone to the Coast, supposedly to seek work as a lumberjack. Instead, he launched a full-scale assault on the Cottica region's Ampuku shrines. Shrines were torn down and cult paraphernalia burnt; it was all frighteningly reminiscent of the "Coba purges" that had devastated the spirit medium cults. Particularly unsettling was the news that Wensi singled out Ampuku shrines, places of veneration associated with Akule. Dominiki had never met Akule, but considered himself his successor. Wensi dared to send an open challenge to Dominiki, demanding his complete surrender. If no signs of capitulation reached him, Wensi threatened, he would return to Akeekuna to bring Dominiki's reign to an end.

The promised confrontation took place in May 1932. Dominiki was ready. He had brought his “heavy artillery”—his strongest Ampuku obiya—to Akeekuna’s waterfront, to keep Wensi and his supernatural weapons at bay. But to no avail. Wensi, armed with his amusu (a thorned branch) in one hand and a machete in the other, with red stripes on his arms and legs (red was the favorite color of Amanfu, his possessing spirit) came ashore and vandalized the place. Spectators were stunned that he could act like that without being killed on the spot by Dominiki’s supernatural powers. Wensi went straight to the main temple and there ordered some men to carry out eight demijohns of rum and nine boxes of clothing. Then he put the temple to the torch and divided the rum and clothes among Akeekuna’s villagers. While this was going on, Dominiki remained hidden in his house.

An eyewitness² related to us what he had seen:

When Baa³ Wensi came ashore he didn’t waste time. He went straight for Akomwoi [one of Dominiki’s two shrines] where Dominiki had erected 99 *faaka* [lit.: flags; special-purpose shrines]. Ampuku, Papa obiya, everything! Baa Wensi came up to Akomwoi. He dragged a demijohn out of the storehouse, broke it and set fire to it: flóóó, the whole shrine engulfed in flames! All of Dominiki’s obiya were lost. Nothing left but ashes. No one who saw this will ever forget it!

The story is continued in the notebooks of the Reverend Father Morssink, who often visited the area during the first decades of last century and from 1932 to 1935 made systematic notes on his visits to the Maroons. He was greatly interested in Wensi whom, in the early years (1932–1933), he considered to be the one man who could bring the Ndyuka to Christianity:

The next day Wensi crowned his victory.⁴ He called all the villagers together and announced that from then on he would tolerate no one who claimed to be possessed by a gadu. His words were: “No one with obiya should dare to open his mouth and cry out: *Wan gadu e kisi mi!* (A deity has taken possession of me!) God does not come down from heaven to reign in human heads.” Then he sent for his uncle Dominiki, to scold him for polygyny, and reproached him for having extorted money from people.⁵ “Even the Bakaa who know how to make money do not squeeze it from people the way you have done; you who cannot make it yourself! I will drive away your obiya so that you can no longer cheat people.” He touched Dominiki on the head three times with a stick and told him: “Now call your wives.”

Current accounts differ on Wensi’s actual ruling in this matter, but all versions agree that he declared himself opposed to polygyny. He allowed Dominiki to keep his first wife because “the first one had been assigned to him from heaven.” He sent the other four packing and for-

bade them to return to their husband. Having settled this, Wensi proceeded to hand out more rum and clothes to Akeekuna's inhabitants.

Wensi's humiliating attack crushed Dominiki; all reports stress that he never recovered. Afterwards he fled to Diitabiki, where Gaan Tata's High Priest offered him asylum. From Diitabiki he traveled to Paramaribo where, many years later, he lost all his remaining possessions when his house burned down—an event that the Ndyuka generally consider definitive proof of divine disfavor. People who recall meeting Dominiki in the capital city were struck by his melancholy. His wives, with one exception, had forsaken him; one even forbade her children to contact their father. He spent his final years in a Cottica village, where he died, destitute, in the early 1940s. A generation after Dominiki's death, his wrathful ghost took possession of Kaabu. That happened in 1961, on our first day of fieldwork.

THE DESTROYER

After his confrontation with Dominiki and the latter's flight to Diitabiki, Wensi allowed himself free rein to continue his work of destruction. Places that Dominiki had used for his work as a shaman were systematically desecrated. The sacred *kankantii* (silk-cotton tree) was chopped down after Wensi first challenged it: "If am wrong, punish me, but if I am right, let the tree fall down." According to legend, he needed only one chop with his axe to fell this forest giant. Anything associated with Dominiki that could burn was burned, including, one historian insisted,⁶ a box with 700 French francs in it.

From his base at Akeekuna, Wensi began making forays into Ndyuka villages on the *Opu* Tapanahoni, carefully selecting settlements where he feared little opposition: the villages of his own clan or its allies.⁷ There he is estimated to have burned 200 shrines, including spirit medium houses, ancestor poles, and other sacred constructions. He chopped down several *kankantii* for being known Papagadu abodes, and he destroyed termite hills, considered to be the dwellings of a particularly vicious type of Ampuku. However, Wensi did not attempt to "cleanse" Diitabiki, bulwark of Gaan Tata veneration and the residence of the Gaanman.

About this time Wensi began working with his own *magwenu* (a tree in whose branches and foliage spirits are trapped; a pen for evil entities). Like all prophets before him, Wensi started his own settlement, which he called Siiba Kiiki, half-way between Godoolo and Kisai (see fig. 18, p. 169). During the 1930s this forest camp slowly grew to the size of a village, as many people abandoned Akeekuna and moved to Siiba Kiiki. Wensi's primary occupation was exorcizing Ampuku, some of whom are believed to assist witches for an appropriate "fee." Once driven out, these evil spirits remain to haunt the surrounding

forest, which is why even today, many decades after Siiba Kiiki was abandoned, most people are still reluctant to visit the site for fear of all those Ampuku haunting the place. Certainly, these evil spirits were trapped in the magwenu, but one should not come too close to the tree. The exorcized spirits do not always remain caged; they might roam through the surrounding forest as if on a long leash.

SECRET DIPLOMACY

Even before the sacred tree of Akeekuna fell, secret diplomacy had started between Wensi and Kanape, who was then both acting Gaanman and Gaan Tata's High Priest. Morssink (1932–1935) knew of no fewer than six "secret" missions from Diitabiki to Akeekuna, all under the supervision of Kanape. The priests at Diitabiki were not sorry to see the destruction of Akeekuna's Ampuku ritual center, nor were they unhappy with the sharp decline in the number of spirit mediums and shamans as a result of Wensi's iconoclastic work at Siiba Kiiki. Fewer spirit mediums and fewer shamans meant more lucrative work for Gaan Tata's oracle. Still, Kanape must have realized that any accord with Wensi would ultimately bring about the destruction of the Gaan Tata cult. Wensi's theology may have been a less than coherent and homogenous system of ideas, but it was dangerously different from what Kanape and his followers believed. That must have been obvious to the old High Priest. Moreover, Wensi demanded certain changes in religious practice—an immediate end to "corpse divination" and to the moneymaking custom of ritually purifying the gadu lai, the material legacies of convicted witches and sinners—that brought him into direct conflict with Diitabiki's interests.

To implement and to consolidate his far-reaching reforms, Wensi needed and demanded another gaan kuutu of Den Tualufu, the Ndyuka nation. Only a Gaanman could convene such a council, but Kanape's policy was to stall for time, hoping to dampen the Ndyuka's revolutionary ardor and to prevent Wensi from taking the great council by storm. Time would prove Kanape right. An endless series of postponements seduced Wensi into trying alternative strategies. He initiated discussions with the Roman Catholic mission. That attracted considerable attention, but what worried people even more were some desperate actions that underlined Wensi's willingness to smash the icons of established Ndyuka faith. In April of 1933, he journeyed from Akeekuna to the foaming waters above the Gaan Olo falls. At the entrance to this natural structure of falls and rapids stands a most conspicuous monolith (see fig. 19) called *Weti Ede* (White [Capped] Head). Wensi profaned this huge, chalky rock by painting it red, Amanfu's favorite color. More than an act of sacrilege, this lent credence to Wensi's threat to reveal "the horrors of Saantigoon" to the



Figure 19 Weti Ede—Saantigoon's guardian rock (Tapanahoni River, 1962).

outside world. If Kanape would not give in to his demands, he would show the whites the path leading to the sacred dump, thereby revealing to the outside world how many valuable goods had been wasted. He also threatened to show the colonial authorities where the skeletons of witches lay strewn along the banks of a creek. Only five days later, Wensi burned down a "moon house" in the village of Sanbendumi. This was not only considered an assault on the laws of menstrual isolation—an integral part of traditional Ndyuka culture—but was interpreted as a direct assault on the Gaan Tata cult.

By these violations of Gaan Tata's sacred laws, Wensi made it plain that he was prepared to betray the secrets of the dominant Ndyuka cult to the hostile outside world. This was a threat of breathtaking magnitude, for many Ndyuka looked upon Gaan Tata as a secret weapon to be used if the need should ever arise, that is, in any future armed conflict with the whites. Some (this was three generations ago) certainly viewed such renewed conflict as inevitable. Only when we realize the great value that Ndyuka put on solidarity, and recognize the abhorrence attached to anything that smells of treason (the "selling" of the group to the Bakaa), can we grasp Wensi's audacity. When informants discuss Wensi's reputation, they typically use such phrases as: "Amanfu destroyed the nation," or "Wensi did not cooperate with the Gaanman, he only worked with spirits," and "Wensi

did not cooperate with the Ndyuka people; he burned houses" (an obviously negative comparison with Dominiki, who had carefully prepared for his claim to national leadership).

However, other opinions point in a quite different direction. Several Ndyuka who were close to the old Gaan Tata cult assert that Amanfu really acted as Sweli's avenger. Under the guidance and prodding of Dominiki, these sources argue, the Ampuku spirits had carved out too big a piece for themselves, at the expense of the Gaan Tata cult. After Wensi evicted Dominiki from Akeekuna, they claim, he taught the Ampuku spirits a lesson. The result was that Gaan Tata's servants could resume their daily work. So Amanfu (Wensi's possessing gadu) had in fact been Gaan Tata's helper.

These different interpretations not only show today's confusion about Wensi's role, but may indicate yesterday's (the 1930s) bewilderment. Note that acting Gaanman and High Priest Kanape and his followers did not share this ambivalence. They had made up their minds after April 1933 that Wensi should not be allowed to reform their society. Confronted with this determined opposition, Wensi withdrew to his own turf, the villages of his clansmen and their allies among the Cottica Ndyuka, where he continued his iconoclastic work in an environment that offered less systematic resistance. He died there in 1947. His successor as Amanfu's medium was Andauna, a Ndyuka man from the Cottica who, in his turn, taught his children the Amanfu lore. We will meet them in chapter 16.

WENSI'S MISSION

Many older persons we spoke with had known Wensi quite well. In their accounts he is pictured as a quiet, modest, soft-spoken man with strikingly intellectual leanings. He tirelessly demonstrated a willingness to defend or clarify his position vis-à-vis the Moravians and the Catholics. Among Ndyuka religious leaders he rivaled Akalali as the culture's principal iconoclast.⁸ When Wensi had his first visions, around 1930, the Ndyuka must have considered him exceedingly young to be a religious leader (he was then in his early thirties).

Wensi had received instructions from a type of spirit unknown until then; Amanfu closely resembled a Kumanti deity, but did not belong to that class of supernaturals. Earlier, Wensi had been medium to an ordinary Kumanti spirit, but this second power was different in many ways. Wensi claimed that the deity ordered him to purify Ndyuka society. The divine message told Wensi that many spirits, though revered by elders steeped in traditional religion, were not worthy of such service because they did more harm than good. Particularly the Ampuku were to be distrusted, and Amanfu would help any Ndyuka haunted by their visitations to get rid of this scourge. Only

Kumanti spirits were exempt. The new gadu, Amanfu, was also known as Da Afeemun or Gimiabaala. His main attribute was a small bow with arrows. Brandishing this seemingly tiny weapon, Wensi would magically summon people in need of exorcism.

Although Wensi continued as medium of his first regular Kumanti spirit, he remained ambivalent about so traditional a religious organization. He confided in the missionaries he met, who were fascinated by the "Wensi phenomenon," hoping that this would be the beginning of the long-awaited conversion of the heathens to Christianity. Even more than most Ndyuka, Wensi's sincere interest in theological ideas made him such a valuable informant and interpreter of native culture for the missionaries that some of his statements entered their reports and diaries. So we know from at least three different sources that Wensi had not drastically changed his mind about possession by his Kumanti spirit.

The following account in a mission periodical may be wrong about Wensi foreswearing the Kumanti, but it rings true in other details and illustrates the tortuous contradictions that (we know from other sources) plagued this philosopher throughout his life as he tried to make sense of a complex world of ideas and emotions.

By night an inspiration seized Wensi that he would have to renounce his Kumanti spirit and to banish from his life everything connected with it. But this thought repelled him. Deeply troubled, he felt driven into the forest, where he roamed for five consecutive days and nights, without food, drink or sleep. At last he fell into a trance. When he regained consciousness he became aware that a spirit named Amanfu had taken possession of him. This new gadu cast off the Kumanti spirit, and gave Wensi the strength to break with it completely. Amanfu made it clear to Wensi that God had called him to serve as His whip to punish his people's idolatry. In his dreams two white men repeatedly came to tell him how he could bring this about and lead the Maroons to believe in the one and true God. (Anonymous 1936:76)⁹

Another dream, recorded separately by Halfhide (1947) and Koorndijk (verbal communication), also highlights Wensi's unresolved religious problems.

Amanfu showed Wensi a cross. Above this cross was a dove that spoke: "That which is for the whites will remain for the whites; what belongs to the blacks will remain with them. But the blacks should realize that they owe a lot to this cross. For this reason you should take care that this will become known to Negroes." (Vernooij 1974:107-8)

These dreams about his mission reveal the significance of Christian symbols for Wensi. The recurring appearance of two white men

reveals the urgency of the need to come to terms with the culture and religion of the dominant Outsiders. Such a symbol, however, is not unique to Wensi's movement. The Gaan Tata cult itself employs this imagery as part of its most sacred repertoire; one of Gaan Tata's many names is Bakaa. The association between Ogii and the spirits of Dutch officers and other white soldiers is another example.

At the end of April 1933, while at the height of his power, and in the middle of his iconoclastic campaign, Wensi made an impromptu statement to the assistant of a Catholic missionary about his own mission. It was recorded almost verbatim:

[When jumping ashore at Akeekuna] the first words Wensi spoke to me while giving me his hand were: "Jehovah be with you!" He offered me a stool and when we were seated he reiterated: "Jehovah be with you! I heard you wanted to talk with me. What is it that you hope to accomplish?" I asked him who he was, and he responded: "I am Wensi, but when I was in the Cottica [region] a divine spirit came to me and said: 'I am neither God nor devil.' I have been sent by God the Father to burn and destroy all idolatry in the Tapanahoni [region]. I don't wash people with [medicine] water, but Amanfu, the spirit that has seized me, taught me how to dry leaves of forest plants and crush them into powders to make medicines.¹⁰ With Him and through His strength I work. I kill nobody; I cut no one with a machete, but I destroy everything Bush Negroes call gadu. That I will destroy, because God in Heaven doesn't want these things anymore. And I do have to work for Him, otherwise the Father's [Catholic mission] school will show no progress, and he [the Reverend Father] will not get permission to build a school, and no child will ever be baptized."

The next morning he said: "I was sent to teach people, but now that a Catholic school has come [near Diitabiki], I will do no more teaching. Has the Rev. Father in mind to do only school work, or does he also intend *to build a church?*" [italics in original]

And Wensi continued: "Maria has given birth to Jesus without [sexual intercourse with] a man; she is the mother of Jesus. Peter is the head of the whole church. I have no obeah as Maroons think I have, because if I had one from the devil, could one devil then chase away another? [He was probably referring to his ousting of Dominiki and the destruction of the latter's obeah.] That is why I talk about Jesus, Maria, Jehova, and Santa Yeye [Holy Spirit]. Will an obeah ever talk about these subjects? I only make paint from *kusuwe* [a red dye] and *blauw* [blueing, bleaching balls used among Creoles to ward off evil; Ndyuka make no use of it], these are means to defend myself. Amanfu wants this, that's why I do it, but not as any sort of idolatry."¹¹

Wensi proposed that the Catholic mission help him obtain government support—a few soldiers—to destroy the Gaan Tata cult.

The first thing to go down will be Diitabiki's faakatiki [main ancestor pole of the Ndyuka], then the Gaan Tata shrine and all the smaller shrines and finally the kankantii [the sacred silk-cotton tree] which has all these pangi (cloths) wrapped around its trunk. Subsequently, he will lead the Rev. Father and the soldiers to the Weti Ede stone [which he had painted red], and then lead them into the forest to a place called Saantigoon, so that the government will get to know about the large quantities of money and clothes that have been deposited there in the forest. [See chapter 7.] After that he will show them the skeletons and skulls of the corpses dumped there. . . . He further plans to plant bananas, plantains, and cotton. These plantations should produce so much that he can send a hundred crates of one cubic meter each to the Queen, who will then send clothes in return. . . .

"The devil that ruled Dominiki is the same one that ruled Akule on the Cottica. I have totally exorcized this [devil]. And yet people are ungrateful. Take Kanape for one, who had to pay the Ampuku [of Dominiki] more than a thousand francs, and now threatens to catch me and punish me. What he doesn't know yet is that he is in great danger himself." (Wensi quoted in Morssink 1932-1935)

Cooperation between Wensi and the Catholic mission never got off the ground. The missionaries demanded his complete and immediate conversion to Roman Catholicism, and that was too much too soon for Wensi. It was apparently even more difficult to get the support of the colonial government. During the 1930s, the attitude of the authorities leaned toward nonintervention in "native affairs," certainly for events that happened deep in the interior.

ANTINOMIAN MOVEMENTS

Dominiki's movement differed markedly from Wensi's cult. Dominiki sought and attained legitimacy, Wensi never made any attempt to compromise with existing religious powers. Between 1920 and 1932, his Akeekuna was one of the centers of established Ndyuka religion, one of the main bulwarks of the "religious front" that took shape in 1920-1921. Dominiki established a "working relationship" with the Gaan Tata priesthood, something even Akule never strove for. Kanape, High Priest during those years, allowed Dominiki to collect gadu lai (god's cargoes) on at least one occasion, and even the tri- or quadri-annual Sweli ritual was once held at Akeekuna. Dominiki never mounted iconoclastic purges; instead, he cooperated with the Gaanman. That cooperation must have been welcomed at Diitabiki, although the priests will have regretted the loss of income it caused. Noteworthy too is Dominiki's founding of the Sudati cult. Some of Ogi's spiritual forces were channeled into this new possession cult. A more sociological way of putting it would be to say that some of the

charisma of the early Dominiki cult found an outlet in the routines and newly established leader-follower relations that sprung up with the Sudati cult.¹² These servants of Ogii were “groomed” much as other possessing spirits. Humans could come to know their spiritual preferences and sentiments, which meant that these forces could be placated if the need arose. “Dangerousness” remained a characteristic of the Sudati cult, but among lesser mediums it was more a show of toughness and naughtiness than a threat to the status quo. It certainly had none of the unpredictable and truly threatening aspects of Akule’s or Wensi’s mediumship.

The wholesale destruction of Dominiki’s ritual center by Wensi can be read as a frontal assault on Ogii’s religious regime. And indeed, Wensi considered himself a medium to a Kumanti or “Super Kumanti” spirit, thus a natural enemy of the Ampuku considered to be Ogii’s foot soldiers. And many were the Ampuku that he exorcized at his village of Siiba Kiiki. But the evidence remains confusing, for in other respects he fully belonged to the antinomian tradition of Ndyuka religion as propagated by Akule and Dominiki, movements that showed themselves squarely opposed to the moral laws promulgated earlier by the Gaan Tata priesthood. Every now and then, when the spirit seized him, Wensi turned into a tyrant. At several occasions, he humiliated his fellow Ndyuka, ordering them around, setting them to work on his gardens, and commandeering their women into adultery with him.

People believed that Wensi’s supernatural powers could kill them if they did not follow his orders to the letter. Even when he ordered men to bring their wives to his house for his sexual pleasure, the husbands did not venture to take action against him. Wensi humiliated these husbands by commanding them to bring their wives to him in person, and then perform chores for him. They had to chop firewood and cook a dinner for the usurper of their conjugal rights. If they refused, if they did not follow his orders to the letter, Amanfu would kill them, Wensi declared. He occasionally used women as footstools: sitting in his hammock he would let his feet rest on a reclining female. Nobody then dared to resist him. Still, as was the case with the prophet Akalali, at other times he was “a quiet, modest, soft-spoken man.”

Although we have no evidence that he preached amorality in public, there is an unmistakable duplicity in his views. On several occasions, he went so far as to state that certain moral precepts were binding on his subjects, but not on himself. He frequently defended monogamous marriage, as when he sent four of Dominiki’s wives back to their families. But when queried by missionaries he made it plain that such rules did not apply to himself. Like Akule before him, Wensi defended his version of *droit de seigneur*, “the rights of the powerful.”

Wensi’s program for religious reform turned out to be overly ambitious. After the first euphoria brought about by his effortless destruc-

tion of Akeekuna had evaporated, he was no longer in a position to effectively threaten the Gaan Tata priesthood and its powerful High Priest, Kanape. The revolutionary changes he sought probably were pressed too early in Ndyuka history to become a real threat for the Gaan Tata regime. Diitabiki's ritual center recovered from the shock of Wensi's assault and maintained its dominance over Ndyuka religious life for another generation. Wensi experimented with a new form of spirituality, centering on the Amanfu gadu, sent by the Christians' gadu Jehovah.¹³ Amanfu could not be categorized as either an Ampuku or a Kumanti, although it had aspects of both. Wensi distanced himself from most of Ndyuka religion by pointing at his direct connection with Christianity.

During the 1940s, Wensi withdrew with a group of devoted followers to the Ndyuka villages of the Cottica area, where he still commanded great respect. He forbade the physical punishment for adulterers, preached against the veneration of obiya, and ordered all silk cotton trees to be felled. Combating witchcraft, Wensi insisted, was not a task for humans but for the Supreme Deity, Jehovah. In particular he condemned the practice of dumping corpses of suspected witches at Saantigoon and other unhallowed places. Jehovah had sent his Amanfu spirit to the Ndyuka to tell them to stop this evil practice. "After me," Amanfu announced in a manner reminiscent of John the Baptist, "another, much more powerful spirit will come. That spirit will teach you anything you need to know, and then bring all Ndyuka to the church of Jehovah" (van der Linde 1956:202).

During most of our research in the Tapanahoni, Wensi seemed an isolated figure, a star that shone briefly but without legacy after his death in 1947. But later, in 1986, during the civil war, we were to discover that the first wave of shamans recruited by the Jungle Commando to help them fight the National Army was largely composed of men whose perspectives had been formed by Wensi, or by Andauna and other former assistants (see chapter 16).

Notes

¹ They will play a more important role in chapter 15, which discusses the Surinamese civil war.

² Source: Da Asawooko, Diitabiki village, Misidyan clan.

³ Short for baala, brother. By using Baa instead of Da (father), our informant indicated Wensi's youth.

⁴ Morssink himself wasn't present when this confrontation took place. The report is based on what two of his assistants told him about Wensi's challenge to Dominiki. The broad outlines of Morssink's report are confirmed by Ndyuka who, anticipating a showdown between the two men, had eagerly traveled to Akeekuna. As usual, Asawooko gave the most detailed account of the clash.

⁵ "He lived in style at others' expense," is the dour commentary on Dominiki by Father Morssink (1932-1935).

⁶ Source: Asawooko.

- ⁷ Wensi's clan was the Pinasi. Closely allied to the Pinasi were the Pataa; confederates of these two clans were the Piika and Dyu.
- ⁸ Many of his actions and some of his theology resembled those of Anake, the Saamaka prophet (Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 1988:121–135).
- ⁹ Running into the forest and roaming for days on end without food, drink, or rest is not "normal" in Maroon culture, not even for people possessed. Those who feel themselves invaded by a new spirit require a human environment to interpret its manifestation. That Wensi did not behave in accordance with standard expectations need not, however, raise doubts as to the veracity of the missionary's account. Wensi's deviance from the normal pattern may only have indicated his intense personal involvement. His behavior is reminiscent of the vision quest among North American Indians where, contrary to the possession experience of Maroons, aspiring persons voluntarily withdraw to a secluded spot where they fast and pray to obtain the favor of some spirit. The difference is that Wensi presumably did not make a deliberate attempt to obtain supernatural power: he felt driven into seclusion, and at the end of five days' torment found himself possessed, by Amanfu.
- ¹⁰ Morssink wrote Amafu instead of Amanfu. This reference reminds us of the Saamaka prophet Anake who collected plants on a systematic basis for medicinal purposes. Anake built his own apothecary. Wensi seems not to have attempted a similar methodical effort.
- ¹¹ "It is Jehovah," who sent Amanfu to the world, Amelikan, Gaan Tata's last High Priest, explained to me in 1970. During his nocturnal walks through Diitabiki, the god speaking through his mouth was Amanfu. Wensi's speech to the Catholic missionary Morssink is quoted in Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering, 1988:262–263. Richard Price was kind enough to point out to us that data collected by himself among Saamaka showed that Wensi had been in contact with Pobosi, leader of the Jesus-Maria movement of the Sentea Creek in Saamaka territory (Cf. Thoden van Velzen & van Wetering 1988:145; Schelts 1922; and Müller 1922:71). Pobosi's hour of fame was a good ten years before Wensi's opening attack on Dominiki.
- ¹² About the recurring sociological problem of routinization Roy Wallis (1996:80) had this to say:
- Charisma is inevitably a precarious form of authority. Max Weber maintained that it could exist in its pure form for only a relatively brief period. Endurance over time or wider spread is less likely to introduce the need for mechanisms of coordination, supervision, and delegation. In consequence there will arise increasing impersonality and routine and the desire for greater stability and predictability on the part of officials.
- ¹³ Amelikan, Gaan Tata's last High priest, worked hard to get accepted as medium of Amanfu, but never succeeded.

A Time of Uncertainty

ANOTHER ATTEMPTED REFORMATION

The Christian missionaries had thought at first that Wensi would deliver the Ndyuka to them, but in the end they too would be disappointed: Wensi died in 1947 without openly embracing Christianity. Even before his demise, the Gaan Tata cult rebounded and Diitabiki's Gaan Tata oracle had once again become the dominant religious and political institution in Ndyuka society. During the 1940s and '50s, a few of Ogii's prophets briefly attracted attention, but none of them could enthrall the Ndyuka as Dominiki had. They drew a few devoted followers, restated Ogii's gospel, and struck deals with Gaan Tata's priests. The young woman Kaabu, whom we met in the second chapter, belonged to this league: briefly captivating the audience, then gradually fading in significance.

But beginning in the 1950s, a new breed of shamans began to offer a much more radical solution to the Ndyuka: they demanded an overhaul of the Gaan Tata cult and of mortuary ritual. The most famous of these was Dewini, a shaman who told people that his authority originated from *Seiwenti*, yet another spiritual agency unknown until then. We have here something comparable to Wensi and his Amanfu spirit: again Ndyuka were told that their society should be revamped, and again the order came from an unfamiliar type of spirit. By demanding that witches' corpses should not be left unburied and their possessions not confiscated, Dewini made himself the spokesman for a younger generation of Ndyuka, most of whom were gainfully employed but afraid that, after their deaths, their money would end up in the wallets of Gaan Tata's priests. At the end of the 1950s, Dewini arrived at Diitabiki with nine cargo canoes, to shower the priests with gifts

while making his supporters' wishes known. But the priests remained adamant: not a single law of Gaan Tata could be changed by humans.

After several further and equally unsuccessful attempts, Dewini threw in the towel. In the late 1960s he took up residence in Paramaribo. As a shaman he serviced a mixed clientele there, not only Ndyuka and other Maroons, but Creoles and even Hindustani. His influence on events in the Tapanahoni region declined: although he continued to be held in high esteem, no one believed that he could actually implement radical change. Not until the early 1970s would the religious and political landscape be altered significantly.

A HIGH PRIEST WITHOUT A SENSE OF DIRECTION

Dewini failed to reform the Gaan Tata cult, and unrest continued, especially among the thousands of migrants who had settled in Paramaribo. To worsen this volatile situation, after Akontu Velanti's death in 1964 a rift opened up between the new Gaanman, Gazon Matodja (term of office: 1966–present), and the new High Priest, Asimfu or Amelikan (term of office: 1966–1996). When Amelikan claimed the position of Basi fu a Gadu Wooko (High Priest), he took control of the sacred bundle and, in the face of considerable opposition, began consulting the oracle. Amelikan, who was the brother of Akontu, also believed himself to have been cheated out of the office of Gaanman. Creole politicians in Paramaribo promised him that they would back his claim to the Paramount Chieftaincy, so Amelikan hoisted the flag of the NPS (the Coastal Creoles' Nationale Partij Suriname) over Gaan Tata's temple. However, in Tapanahoni society such matters as the Gaanmanship are decided not by distant city politicians but by the gaan kuutu, and this palaver of Captains and other notables from every village decided the issue in favor of Gazon.

Amelikan then followed two courses of action simultaneously. One was the sensible policy of any beginning High Priest: building a base of deputy priests loyal to himself and to him alone. The other was a desperate fling at mediumship of a yeye (a restorer spirit), and it was this venture that proved to be his undoing. The first maneuver was reasonably successful. Amelikan gradually lowered the professional demands on the old staff while encouraging rumors to the effect that so-and-so had abused his priestly office by tampering with the oracular pronouncements, keeping back vitally needed information on the causes of a patient's affliction and thereby aggravating his condition or, even more grievously, distorting Gaan Tata's messages. He thereby undermined the position of these priests to such an extent that they had to be replaced. The new appointees were close relatives or clients of the new boss, persons who for one reason or another had fled their native villages and thrown themselves upon the mercy of the High Priest.

The obvious reason for such purges is always the same: the High Priest wants to replace the old staff of his predecessor with men more beholden to himself. In this manner, the hieratic staff is transformed into a workable apparatus for power wielding. Had Amelikan stopped there, he would indeed have become a formidable figure in Tapanahoni society. But he didn't. By 1970, although the High Priest had not been able to drive out every member of the old priesthood, at least its most powerful men were either dead or sufficiently discredited to be inconsequential. His malevolent attention stayed focused on Gaanman Gazon, his (classificatory) brother.

Amelikan chose to level his accusations not only at the living, but also at the dead among Gaan Tata's priests—and sometimes with even greater vehemence. Many deceased priests were targeted, including his own brother, the previous High Priest, whom he accused of having debased his office through fraud, theft, and amoral behavior.

In the fall of 1970, when we again lived for a couple of months in Diitabiki, we often met Amelikan at the oracle. At night, at least three times a week, his spirit would possess him and drive him on long, nocturnal walks through the village, waking people with his hoarse bel-lowing. This practice, people told us, had started years earlier, shortly after he crowned himself Gaan Tata's High Priest.

VOICES CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

Amelikan's daylight discourse was hardly less taunting than his nocturnal soliloquies. We wrote down many of his nightly monologues verbatim, by flashlight. The following ten excerpts are divided over two voices: The first five are Amelikan's, commenting on daily events and life in general while directing his deputy priests at the oracle. The second five are his possessing gadu's voice. (Exactly what spirit had invaded him remained a matter of debate among Ndyuka elders.)

Amelikan speaking at the oracle, first voice:

I am the servant of Gaan Tata; the guardian of his awful secrets. Mine was the responsibility to continue my brother's work, fouled though it was by his sins. Let me tell you there is no one else [to perform this function adequately]. Others hate me for it; I am not afraid! What did I tell you? [Bystander:] You are not afraid. [It is part of Ndyuka public discourse to look for someone who will repeat your words when you feel they are important enough to enter the records.] [Amelikan again:] Right, I am not afraid, because those who walk upright¹ have nothing to fear. We'll see what happens, but I am telling you, I will not be the first one to die. Repeat, what did I just tell you? [Bystander repeats his words.]

I crush all worms under my feet, those little dirty things that envy me! Look, city people love me, you should have seen all the

goods they bring me: one boat full of rum and beer, of codfish and salted meat. Go and have a look at my false teeth right on the top plank in my cupboard. I just received them!²

Yes, city people love me. And those dirty little things gnawing at my liver, they hate me for it; but the time will soon come when I have them under my feet! Today I eat rich food and drink as much liquor as I like; I hoard my strength. But they? Don't make me laugh; they grow weaker all the time. I have an obiya that will take care of them; whenever they fill themselves with jealous thoughts, their buttocks shrivel away while mine get fatter all the time.³ I am the man!

You know, you should know more about my spirit; he warned my older brother [Akontu], who did not listen but went on to stain his daughter⁴ with his filth. Nobody ever listens! The other man [probably referring to Wensi], he threw all their silly obiya into the river. Obiya? Don't make me laugh. Weapons of spite and envy; forged poorly by a bunch of wishy-washy men; stinking of early rot and too many compromises. The river carried all that away. Repeat what I told you! [Bystander complies]

I live in the fear of God. To those who are not afraid of the Lord I say: I wash my hands of thee! I wash my hands of all of you, you hear that? Repeat what I told you! [Bystander complies]

The scene shifts. It is night and Amelikan is walking through the village, driven by his spirit. Second voice:

When the afternoon mellows into darkness I rest, and feel the flesh on my body grow, and it still swings supple with every heavy step in the sand. When Ogii drives me on another midnight walk, these steps are heard in 500 hammocks!

I am the man! who eats the menstrual cloths, and drinks the water of pregnancy. I am the man who has no master; that is why I walk all night, painted in the color of blood—to find him who dares to stand up to me. But nobody dares to leave his hammock. Where is that man?

The other asi said: You young man, bring me your wife before the sun sets. And she came; all dressed up and both mouths washed; and the poor sucker chopped firewood and cooked their food; and his ears were full of giggling. The other horse, you know, that was the man!

But that stubborn fool with his bloodshot eyes; who hides in his house when I challenge him; when I yell in the darkest night: "your mother's vagina is too tight!"; where is he then? A fool who cannot even control his own body, let alone rule this country: a poor miser for all his wealth. He is weak and blood boils in his head. Let him hide. One day all his veins will burst wide open.⁵

Asi: Where is the man? He disappeared; he drowned [voice trailing away in the silent village].

AMELIKAN'S DREAM

One of us decided to leave the hammock and walk over to the oracle where we knew we could find Amelikan. Although the High Priest showed some surprise at having been followed in the middle of the night, he was willing to talk because "the father has just left me." The interview soon turned into a monologue:

The Thing that overpowered me is called Basi Sweli, a yeye sent by Jehovah to restore order among the Ndyuka and all human beings. Humans had angered Jehovah, so, as punishment, he flooded the Earth. He also started a great fire that destroyed almost everything. But then Jehovah saw a few good people. He felt sorry for those. To help these decent people he sent them a spirit to make the Earth worth living in. This was Basi Sweli who kills all evil people but saves the decent ones so that they can complete their lives. [Amelikan recalls the recent death of Ma Sakodié who had reputedly poisoned a cassava she gave to her brother.] She died the same day! And that will be the fate of all those jealous people who begrudge me for becoming Basi fu a Gadu Wooko. They feel there are now two Gaanman instead of one. But there can be no compromise. The office of High Priest doesn't cross family lines [he meant it stays within the same matri-segment]. But all men from our Baaka bee (black lineage), if they are worthy of the office, can become Gaanman.

In the past Ogii burned houses, destroyed obiya, and demanded from married men that they bring their wives for his pleasure. If the husband refused, he would be killed that same day. [Then followed the details we knew from Ogii's prophets of the past: the humiliation of women and their husbands. We expected this to be followed by a condemnation, because as Gaan Tata's High Priest, Amelikan should lead the opposition to the Ogii regime. But no such denouncements were forthcoming, though he did take time to explain that Sa Kaabu's wenti was only Dominiki's ghost, and nothing more.]

Amelikan did not mention Wensi, although he wore the paraphernalia associated with that precursor: he carried a small bow with a few arrows, wore a red head scarf, and tied red ribbons to his legs. His nocturnal seances were full of references to Wensi and his Amanfu spirit. We felt he did not want us to become too familiar with the very private matter of his invading spirit, and therefore he presented us with an account of a respectable yeye.

When we discussed this later with some elders, they showed themselves highly skeptical of Amelikan's claims. Several Ndyuka we spoke with had known Wensi personally, and on different occasions had heard his Amanfu spirit speak. As one elder we knew put it: "What I am hearing from Amelikan's spirit at night doesn't make me think of

Amanfu at all. But he says Amanfu possesses him, so let it be. I am not going to argue with that hothead."

It was the same volatility that caused Amelikan to clash with most of his deputy priests. One by one they deserted him. There were times when he had only one deputy priest left to help him carry Gaan Tata's tabernacle. Amelikan, acting as front bearer, would also take it upon himself to act as the deity's spokesman. When these practices became widely criticized, Amelikan announced that Gaan Tata was taking a vacation. In the meantime, he was searching for replacements of the defected priests. He was briefly successful, enlisting one or two elders to help him at the oracle, but once again he managed to alienate them. The result was that for long periods Gaan Tata could not be consulted.

In 1972, that same combativeness helped Amelikan in the struggle with a new prophet who tried to confiscate the two Gaan Tata tabernacles. The one from Gaanboli was taken, but Amelikan refused to surrender Diitabiki's carry oracle. Nonetheless, the oracular work at Diitabiki came to a complete halt when his deputy priests left him out of fear of being killed by the new prophet. Amelikan stored the bundle in the temple and made long trips to Paramaribo and Cayenne to earn a living as a shaman. Although he regularly returned to Diitabiki, he was left without support there, and he made no serious effort to restart work at Gaan Tata's oracle.

Notes

- ¹ "Those who walk upright," (*leti opu sama*) meaning: those who are not witches.
- ² The artificial dentures Amelikan referred to were given him by politicians of the NPS in the hope that he could bring the Ndyuka to vote for Suriname's independence.
- ³ Amelikan's spirit is referring to the *mangi gogo obiya* (skinny buttocks obiya) that works as a weapon of defense. It makes your evil thoughts hit you like a boomerang, making you look like a person who is starving.
- ⁴ Akontu allegedly had an affair with his stepdaughter. This counts as incest in Ndyuka culture.
- ⁵ Gaanman Gazon was at that time enjoying a government-sponsored tour through a number of West African countries (de Groot 1996:389–398). People from Diitabiki assured us that, in the past, the presence of the Gaanman in Diitabiki had not kept Amelikan from hurling the same abuse through the silent village. When Amelikan said: "he cannot control his own body," he referred to the (for Ndyuka) embarrassing moment when Gazon fainted at the ceremony for opening the first public school in Diitabiki. The "bloodshot eyes" are a reference to Gazon's high blood pressure.

Akalali

A Fury Unleashed

A PLEASANT CONVERSATION TURNS UGLY p. 135

Early in 1971, a 47-year-old¹ shaman named Akalali Wootu presented *his* agenda for renewal. He asked for permission to appear before Gaan Tata “so that his possessing spirit could greet Diitabiki’s deity.” Akalali enjoyed a good reputation: in a society where courtesy is highly valued, he was known as a man of manners, soft-spoken and unobtrusive. When the new medium is supported by kinsmen, such requests are readily granted. This, and the fact that he had earned the gratitude of the Gaanman and one of his kinsmen for having treated them successfully when both were ill, meant that there was no reason to reject Akalali’s request.

And indeed, the first visit was pleasant. Akalali and his retinue of elders (from Loabi, his own village as well as some neighboring ones) stayed a few nights in the Gaanman’s village before the scheduled meeting with Gaan Tata—a gesture recognized and appreciated as a traditional sign of respect. During his meeting with Gaan Tata, greetings were exchanged, and the divine beings made polite inquiries after each other’s health. “They engaged in *such* pleasant conversation,” people later recalled.

What Gaan Tata’s priests did not yet realize was that Akalali meant to usurp their power. In 1965, he had been invaded by a spirit called *Saantigoon Futuboi* (Servant of Saantigoon), an avatar of Ogii. Kaabu, the medium with whom we clashed during our first fieldwork in 1961, had been possessed by a kindred spirit who also, for a few months, was presented as an avatar of Ogii. But Kaabu never attempted to alter the existing religious regime; she only sought a place among the powerful. Akalali, however, claimed that his spirit (a

yeye) had been charged with the task of restoring order to a corrupt world. For sheer ambition and arrogance, his mission rivaled that of Akule. Gaan Tata's priests would soon discover what sort of man they were dealing with.

Akalali's second visit to the oracle immediately introduced problems. Although appropriate courtesies were again exchanged, the



Figure 20 Akalali with wives and a few followers. His sacred staff and gifts from patients are on the table (Nyun Kondee, 1974).

gadu riding Akalali now introduced himself as Saantigoon Futuboi, then mentioned his close relationship with Dominiki's spirit—while stressing that his was a different assignment. He announced that in three months' time he would return to Diitabiki to disclose the true nature of his mission. Most older Ndyuka must have known, even at that early stage, that they were in the presence of one of Ogii's manifestations. People recall telling their friends and relatives: "Ogii has come!" which refers to the return of the deity Ogii, but can also mean something like "We're in trouble now!"

Some months later, early in 1972, Akalali did indeed express a wish to appear before the oracle again. But this third visit was an unmitigated disaster: Saantigoon Futuboi announced that he had no intention of spending the night at Diitabiki—a deliberate insult in Ndyuka culture—and that he would not compromise or make deals with Gaan Tata's priests. Tensions escalated when the new High Priest, Amelikan, then refused to *obo a gadu* (raise the god), meaning he did not want Gaan Tata to be consulted on the matter. (A simple refusal to let the bearers lift the deity's tabernacle is always enough to halt the proceedings.) Amelikan then returned the new prophet's insult by stating that he had more important things to do than to waste time on some "Thing from the Bush," meaning he felt no need to listen to an Ampuku.

Enraged, Akalali reminded Amelikan that Gaan Tata and his priests "had an appointment with his spirit" but that, because of their refusal to give him a hearing, Ogii had decided to bring his message directly to the Ndyuka people. The Gaan Tata cult, Akalali charged, had degenerated into a senseless, even sinful institution. He accused its custodians of doing nothing to check its deterioration into depravity; on the contrary, he shouted, the priests were behind these criminal changes. Akalali then demanded that Gaan Tata's forest shrines be destroyed, that confiscation of the inheritances of witches and sinners be halted, and that the disposal of unburied corpses into the jungle be stopped immediately. He ordered Gaanman Gazon, the High Priest Amelikan, and all the other priests to accompany him to the Saantigoon sanctuary, so that they could participate in the destruction of the shrines and bring their discarded wares back to the villages for general distribution. "It is sinful to spoil valuable goods while the Ndyuka people suffer from poverty!"

To no one's surprise, neither the Gaanman nor the priests were willing to cooperate in this expedition. But Akalali, accompanied by only two trusted kinsmen, made the trip to Saantigoon, tore down the shrines, and took some valuables back with him to Diitabiki.

This was the decisive moment. The community held its breath. Many expected that Gaan Tata would strike Akalali or his family with sickness, if not sudden death. But He didn't, and Akalali, glowing with health and triumph, made several more trips to the once sacred place,

leading a following steadily growing in size and enthusiasm. Sometimes he would go twice a week, bringing back one boatload of valuables after another, which he graciously distributed. Many heart-rending scenes were reported to have ensued: people who recognized their parents' belongings broke into tears.

Akalali did not waste time. With the community stunned by his audacity, he dealt his adversaries the political coup de grâce. One week after his first visit to Saantigoon, he forbade Gaan Tata's priests to consult their oracle: "Let the deity take a rest!" He warned that anyone who dared to raise the sacred bundle for consultation would incur the wrath of Saantigoon Futuboi. He told us, in 1973, that this drastic measure had not been part of his original plan; while he had always meant to stop the confiscation of inheritances, he never intended to destroy the Gaan Tata oracles at Diitabiki and Gaanboli. But annoyed by priestly obstruction (and, one imagines, emboldened by success) he took the more radical course.

In the eyes of most Ndyuka, putting an end to "the abominable institution"—the confiscation of inheritances and the denial of interment for corpses—was Akalali's greatest accomplishment. Many people also appreciated that he drastically scaled down the duration of mourning rituals, and thereby their expense. Formerly a widow could not remarry within a year after her husband's death and was expected to spend almost the entire period in his village, staging a daily show of conspicuous deference toward her late husband's relatives. When a man lost his wife he faced virtually the same treatment. For the first three months he was essentially a prisoner of his deceased's wife family. Then he would be given permission to seek employment on the Coast for the explicit purpose of earning enough money to cover the cost of her elaborate memorial rites. Saantigoon Futuboi ordered that the customary minimum of twelve months of mourning (which was commonly extended to eighteen months, two years, or even longer), was to be cut by half. No one who had lost his or her spouse through death should be kept in mourning for more than six months. And expenditures for funerary rites were to be substantially reduced. This decree engendered enormous enthusiasm, for during the last decades, the Ndyuka had chafed under increasingly onerous mourning obligations.

People were initially more ambivalent about the order to put an immediate halt to divination by corpse carrying. They asked: "How are we going to know who the witches were, and more important, whether they have left accomplices and dangerous medicines behind?" Akalali needed to come up with a solution to the problem of wisi. And this he attempted to do. After experimenting with a number of witch-finding techniques, he decided on a program of village-based examinations, and—this is where he departed radically from the Gaan Tata priesthood—he chose to examine the living instead of the dead.

Immediately, supernatural intervention began crowning Akalali's success: many cases of sickness and death were attributed to the wrath of the prophet's gadu. Recent deaths among Gaan Tata's priesthood were avidly reinterpreted, even though many of the men had long been in office and some died well past middle age. The First Priest, who expired in January 1972, was between eighty-five and ninety years old. Two other old-timers had been plagued with eye troubles. Still, there were some younger priests who died; one was a recently approved bearer of the sacred bundle, who died quite unexpectedly. The same fate befell the speaker for the oracle, and also struck a headman often associated with the priests. A particularly memorable incident involved a bearer of Gaanboli's oracle who had openly shown disrespect for the prophet. The two men engaged in a shouting match at the boat landing of a village they both were then visiting. When the defender of the old dispensation returned home to Gaanboli, he boasted of his heroic role in the altercation. Only days later, a falling branch hit him; a week later he was dead. That accident *also* occurred at a boat landing, as people never failed to emphasize. (Boat landings at villages in Suriname's interior are places where people wash their dishes, clothes and bodies, fish, and generally "hang out.")

These misfortunes put the fear of Saantigoon Futuboi into the hearts of Diitabiki's priests and convinced them that Akalali had become the anointed scourge who would rightfully punish Diitabiki for its sins. High Priest Amelikan remained the exception: he vehemently rejected this "groveling before a bush spirit." Unfortunately for him, however, he stood literally alone in resisting the new power. He could not, therefore, consult Gaan Tata; to manage that he would have needed at least two assistants to carry the tabernacle while he was asking it questions. But Amelikan never gave in. The tabernacle remained in the Diitabiki temple, gathering dust.

Akalali then traveled to Gaanboli and confiscated Da Lebi Koosi, the second sacred Gaan Tata bundle. He stored it on the upper floor of his house. There it would remain until his star shone less brightly. One day during the years when his dictates were the law of the land, two assistant priests came to Akalali's door to demand the return of the Gaan Tata obiya. He threatened them with violence, whereupon they left empty-handed.

As was proper for a man in his position—like Dominiki and Wensi before him—Akalali founded his own village. It was called Nyun Kondee (New Village) or Nyunfii (New Freedom) and was situated on an island opposite the ancient village of Pikin Kondee (see fig. 18, p. 169). The new settlement was less than a mile (only minutes by boat) from his native village of Loabi. In 1974 we counted 55 houses in the new village, not large or impressive ones, but simple structures as in forest camps. Akalali waited eighteen months before attempting to

“upgrade” his settlement into a village with full ritual status. To achieve this he needed a faakatiki and a kee osu. It took several months of fierce struggle with the elders of his clan, the Pataa, but Akalali achieved his real kondee. In 1978 Nyun Kondee had 140 houses, many built as permanent residences.



Figure 21 Akalali's carry oracle blessing a deputy priest (Nyun Kondee, 1977).

AKALALI'S LECTURE

Akalali liked to make *poopokanda* (propaganda), as he named his efforts to explain his task. In 1973 he presented us with what he considered to be essential knowledge for those desiring to understand his mission. It is a report about his own experiences, several selected oral history accounts, and some political statements about his enemies, the Gaan Tata priesthood. We call it a "lecture" because it struck us as a set of coherent statements with a clear purpose: to impress upon us (and anyone else who would listen to his account) the significance and necessity of his work. This is what he told us about the initiation of his spirit seizure:

When I was still thinking about the death of our Gaanman [Akontu Velanti, who died in 1964], I was sitting on the banks of the Marowijne River. Suddenly in the clouds above the river I saw a bridge that spanned the Marowijne [at Akalali's camp the river is at least two kilometers wide]. The bridge linked Suriname with French Guiana. On that bridge, high up in the sky, I clearly saw two persons on the railing: one was a man, the other a woman. I recall that it was about five o'clock in the afternoon. Then another woman joined the two persons, and it was as if a bolt of lightning struck me. I didn't know where I was nor what I was doing there. *A gadu kisi mi*: I was possessed by this spirit. Eleven months later the gadu ordered me to visit Gaanman Gazon to let the new Chief know about the spirit and tell him that later we would have business to discuss.

A spirit seizure that begins with a vision is relatively rare in Ndyuka culture. To start one's account with such an experience indicates that we are dealing with something extraordinary. This implication is enhanced by the dramatic suddenness of the experience: it was as if a bolt of lightning struck Akalali. The onset of his possession came while he pondered the death of Akontu, the reigning Ndyuka Gaanman and High Priest of the Gaan Tata cult. An era was drawing to its close, and the time was ripe for new approaches. The exchange of opinions Akalali claimed to have had with Gazon, the new Ndyuka Gaanman, took place eleven months later, in 1965, after the great mourning feast for Akontu had been completed and the new Gaanman could start discussing state business. The lengthy period that elapsed between Akalali's spirit seizure and his journey to the new Chief indicated that the medium intended to discuss state affairs. All Ndyuka immediately grasped the significance of this communication.

One is struck by the quite "un-Ndyuka-like" symbolism Akalali uses here. The huge bridge, an icon of modernity, spans the Marowijne River to connect Suriname and French Guiana, the two homelands of all Businengee. This may indicate a desire for pan-Maroon fraternity, for economic development of the interior, or even for closer ties with

the dominant Coastal (Western) culture. Who and what are the beings on this bridge, so high up in the sky? Why are two of them female? Are they whites or Ndyuka, humans or angels? Akalali was born and raised on the French side of the Marowijne and had therefore probably been exposed to some Roman Catholic ideas and imagery. Perhaps he believed that angels were urging him to accomplish his task. We cannot know what was in his mind. What we do know is that Saantigoon Futuboi had been the driving force behind his main mission. Once Akalali had accomplished that, a much gentler spirit took possession of him, a healer rather than a scourge. He said that the name of that spirit was Ankel, which could have been his pronunciation of the word "angel" in French (*ange*), in Dutch (*engel*), or even in English.

Akalali continued his lecture with the familiar myth of the boat moving upstream without any effort by its three occupants. Then he narrated episodes of Dikii's life, switched back to the first years of the Runaways in the Tapanahoni region, emphasizing the high infant mortality rate and how the god of the Runaways had pleaded with Ogii to help them survive.

As payment for his services Ogii demanded from Sweli Gadu, the god of the Runaways, that all possessions of witches be given to him. And so it happened. After the death of a witch the inheritance was brought to Saantigoon. The deity belonged to the forest, therefore the goods should be brought to the forest. But the gadu never asked for any corpses of witches to be dumped there! Gaan Tata's evil priests fooled the Ndyuka people with the lie that this was also demanded by Ogii.

Now things grew worse. The black lineage [the Gaanman's descent line] exploited the obiya. Instead of just carrying witches' possessions to Saantigoon, members of the Chief's family first picked out whatever they liked. Many people were declared witches who never in their life had done anything wrong. They gave Dikii the Sweli obiya to drink. Twice he was found innocent, but they rubbed his head with feces. All these were sins. That is why we held a pee pikadu (feast of atonement) at Nyun Kondee.

When my gadu discussed these matters with Gaanman Gazon and his Captains, they all agreed they had been very much responsible for taking the bodies of all these people to the forest and leaving them there, unburied. The spirit Ogii also told them that he had accepted the inheritances of witches as payment for services rendered, but now he felt the debt had been fully paid, that there were no more outstanding bills. That is why the legacies of witches should never again have to be confiscated. That is why Saantigoon's Gaan Tata shrines had to be destroyed. It had all gone too far! Human greed had corrupted a divine commandment!

Ending his statement to us, Akalali summed up: "All the ghosts of the dead whose remains were discarded, and all the earth spirits who

were offended by those rotting corpses, held a meeting and decided to correct this great evil. The restorer spirit they evoked is the one who possesses me!"

In Akalali's view, which was widely shared among the Ndyuka during most of the 1970s, the Gaan Tata cult had lost its compass. It so outrageously transcended its original divine assignment that it had turned into a dysfunctional, even criminal, enterprise. Akalali accused its custodians of not controlling this deterioration: on the contrary, he said, they had made things worse. And, he and many others argued, what made their sinful behavior totally inexcusable was that Gaan Tata's priests were not merely incompetent but deliberately rapacious: their first interest lay in appropriating the legacies belonging to the dead's rightful inheritors. This, Akalali said, is what awakened the furies of revenge.

DAYS OF EUPHORIA

Not surprisingly, Akalali's message received widespread and enthusiastic support. During the early years (1972–1976) the mood was euphoric. What was surprising is that this enthusiasm among the "clientele" of Gaan Tata's priesthood was shared by at least some of the priests themselves. We have spoken with Gaan Tata priests who, in the privacy of their homes, expressed great satisfaction that Akalali had cleaned house for them, had done what the priests themselves had known was called for, but had never been able to accomplish. Years later, in 1978, when Akalali's predictable downfall had begun; even people who once had been closely associated with the Gaan Tata cult would openly say about this period: "We were all behind him then. All of us! We all believed he could kill us. Not one of us doubted that he was doing the right thing."

Their recollection corresponds with our field notes from that time. One of our informants,² who is usually skeptical about new religious leaders and their claims, discussed the situation upon our return to Diitabiki in December 1973:

Everything has changed here since Akalali's spirit came. Everything! Diitabiki's Gaan Tata has retired. No one dares to lift the deity [use him as a "carry oracle"] because Akalali threatens to kill the bearers. Da Lebi Koosi ["Father (wearing) Red Clothes," the name of Gaanboli's Gaan Tata bundle] is now a prisoner of Akalali. He locked him up in a house as small and dirty as a chicken coop. Da Tebu (another renowned Gaanboli deity) was taken to Akalali's village for the feast of atonement (August–November 1973), and only recently did Tebu's priests get permission to bring him back to his village. People stopped carrying Agedeonsu at Tabiki; Akalali forbade it under penalty of death. Our Gaanman [Gazon] is no

longer a full Chief, he is only half a Gaanman. Nothing can be done on this river without Ogi's approval. Corpses are no longer carried through the village [for divination]. Today the deceased is washed, dressed in clean clothes, brought to the mortuary; people play drums; a decent grave is dug and the corpse is carried to its grave in a coffin. It is forbidden to ask the ghost questions. The gravediggers carry the coffin with their hands [not on their heads, for that would have meant another opportunity to interrogate the spirit]. It is all just as you Bakaa do. But if your wife is beautiful, and the spirit [meaning Ogi] wants her, he just sends for her, and you, as her husband, will have to bring her. You cannot refuse; Ogi would kill you on the spot.

A younger man from the Otoo clan (and therefore associated with the Gaan Tata cult) expressed deep satisfaction with Akalali's mission: "He has taken away the fear of witchcraft. Nowadays you can go anywhere in our land and accept food from all sorts of people. You don't have to be afraid of being poisoned anymore. All the witches have been burned clean."³ Another young Otoo stressed the same point:

Akalali has removed once and for all the fear of wisi. In the past our villages were teeming with wisiman. Young ones, old people, all sorts of witches. Nowadays the people who were detected by Akalali, and then had their witchcraft removed by him, these are exactly the persons you may trust. But people who have not presented themselves for *keli* (examination) by Akalali are to be deeply distrusted; they have something to hide. We all know who they are. [Here he gave a few examples, one of them a Captain.] People avoid them. These are individuals who love to hurt their neighbors.⁴

Both informants, so full of praise for Akalali, were closely related to prominent Gaan Tata priests, and therefore stood to lose a great deal from Akalali's revolution.

CLEANSING WITCHES

Fear of witchcraft was and remains ubiquitous among the Ndyuka, and no one who seeks the highest political and religious office—in this society the two usually go together—can achieve much without offering a plausible solution to the problem. The abolition of both the posthumous inquest and punishment of witches therefore created an ideological vacuum that the new religious leader eventually had to fill. Akalali was compelled to promise to deal with this witchcraft business once and for all. For generations the Gaan Tata priesthood had monopolized the struggle against wisi; that had been the cornerstone of its existence. So in denouncing the Gaan Tata cult as sinful and irrelevant to modern Ndyuka society, Akalali also eliminated the traditional means of handling the obsession with witches.

Saantigoon Futuboi had manifested himself to Akalali during the latter's "period of incubation" (1965–1971), but the time was then not ripe for announcing it. Akalali used those years of waiting to prepare himself for his new career, visiting almost every Ndyuka village in the Tapanahoni region. We understand that he gathered a great deal of information on sensitive issues in these villages, particularly on persons suspected of witchcraft. His future success would hinge on his ability to point the finger at the "right" people: those who were suspected of wisi within their own communities. The importance of such preparation became clear in 1974, when he decided to work outside his "own" area and ventured into Pamaka territory. That visit did not live up to its high expectations, probably because Akalali lacked specific data on social relations in Pamaka society.

It was probably not clear to him, that first year, how he would solve the "wisi problem." He experimented with various methods. Early in 1973, for example, he would visit a village and first embrace all the inhabitants; then suddenly he would ask all the witches to step forward and deliver the instruments of their craft. Knowing the local gossip, it was not difficult for him to drop a few names to get things started. When those so rudely accused did not immediately respond, he would suggest: "Well, *I* know where you have hidden your evil stuff! Look behind your house, in the old pan where you keep it. Bring it down here right now!" Surprisingly often, a suspect would actually comply and return with some objects that were then accepted as his or her witching paraphernalia. No doubt in at least some cases, Akalali had been told actual details about the alleged witch's "method."

Audiences were invariably impressed by the results of his campaign, and tall stories about the prophet's shrewd and even uncanny insight into such matters were recounted time and again. In October and November 1973, for example, he accused four older women of Godoolo village. All four of them denied ever having practiced wisi. With hundreds of people crowded around them, they were told to go to the village's busy waterfront to ponder their many sins. Finally—probably in desperation—they sent word that they were willing to confess. One of these women we knew quite well. People had gossiped about her ever since her son-in-law died suddenly of an infectious disease in the late 1960s. Akalali sent one of his assistants to the waterfront to tell her that her confession was not enough; did she not recall how she had killed her son-in-law? The reply she sent back was affirmative: she had killed the man by poisoning his favorite dish. Such confessions could only have been wrung from the suspects because Akalali knew the specifics of local witchcraft accusations.

But after Akalali had visited several villages in both the Upstream and Downstream areas, murmurs grew that he had not managed to "comb out" the witches completely. His less than total suc-

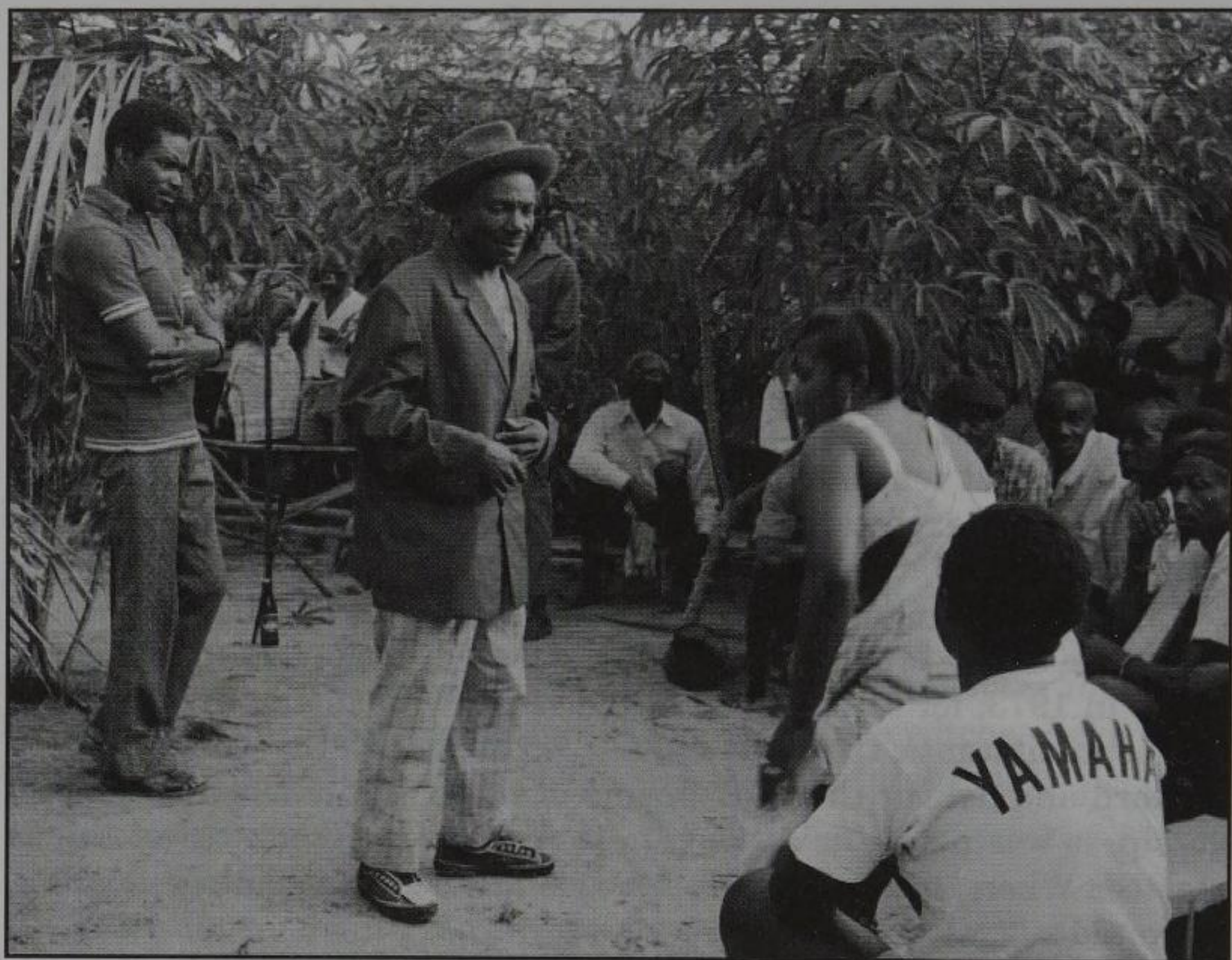


Figure 22 Akalali instructing his assistants during a witch hunt (Nyun Kondee, 1974).

cess was probably due to the Ndyuka's reluctance to make open accusations against fellow villagers. For generations, Gaan Tata's priests had not allowed people to accuse a living person of wisi. Even after the priesthood's downfall, this habituated reticence was not cast off easily. Apart from the fact that people were not familiar with the phenomena of public witchcraft accusations and confessions, there were other reasons for the failure of this method. Those who knew they were suspected (and one knows when one is being talked about by the neighbors and called a witch) were not likely to step forward to admit the sin. For one thing, they could not be certain that the prophet would succeed in rehabilitating them in the eyes of their own kinfolk. Gaan Tata's priests had never managed to do this either, as every Ndyuka knew. Kinsmen and neighbors who harbored suspicions were reluctant to press suspects into making such confessions—partly out of fear of what the witch might do, and partly because they did not like to side openly with somebody not related to them, not even with a prophet.

Unable to overcome such constraints, Akalali considered other approaches. In the second half of 1973 he decided upon a new ritual. This one was *not* faithfully copied from tradition: it contained both new and ancient elements. In devising this ceremony, Akalali must

have kept in mind the legal restrictions imposed upon leadership in the interior by the Government of Suriname: Whatever the physical punishment that need be inflicted on suspects, it should at the very least never endanger their lives. This was perhaps the chief reason why the prophet, like Gaan Tata's priests before him, was so emphatic in explaining the purpose of his antiwitchcraft campaign: he intended to save lives by smelling out witches and cleansing them; he would never endanger human beings. This mantra took the wind out of the sails of the Christians, who had always claimed that they could protect people against witches without killing anyone, violating the law (by leaving corpses unburied), or impoverishing people (confiscating their rightful inheritances).

He initiated a large-scale population survey, and then summoned all Ndyuka from the Tapanahoni region to his village to undergo keli, an examination. The idea behind keli was to separate the sheep from the goats—to distinguish the decent people from those affected by witchcraft and those practicing it. The prophet claimed that Saanti-goon Futuboi had given him the gift of seeing through others and detecting wisi—a sort of psychological x-ray. Witches would henceforth be separated into two categories. The first grouped those who had been involuntarily turned into witches by practitioners of the vile craft who secretly “infected” them. Such victims were not even aware of their condition in its first stages. Often they were contaminated when a witch succeeded in putting “witch poison” into their food. This category Akalali called: *den poli en*, “they [witches] have spoilt him/her.”

Real, deliberate witches, conscious of their evil powers, formed the second category, *den seefi meke*, “self-made (witches).” Some of these might well have started as unwittingly infected individuals who had lost their innocence when, upon gradually realizing what had happened, they willfully used their evil new powers. The *den seefi meke* category therefore comprised the truly nefarious, those evil beyond redemption, depraved persons with only a single purpose: the destruction of human life and happiness.

The main innovation in Akalali's new purification ritual was the *boon* (burn), a cleansing by fire. He actually brought witches close to a blazing flame that was supposed to drive out the evil. The aim of this rite was to protect both the community and the affected, and to reinstate ordinary healthy and decent life. The boon kept the infected but innocent from further decay while depriving “real” witches of their capacity for harming others and themselves.

This procedure brought notable success to Akalali's movement, especially in terms of sheer numbers of people responding to his summons. In January 1974, the prophet claimed to have judged 2,700 men, women, and children. We are uncertain how many of these he branded as witches, but there must have been a few hundred of them.

It took us but little effort to gather data on 113 persons who had been purified in the waning months of 1973, and there may have been many more who were not brought to our attention.

Though resistance could not be overcome in every case, most of those publicly accused of witchcraft soon confessed to having perpetrated various heinous crimes, acknowledging suggested malevolent actions and disgraceful plans. On the whole there were surprisingly few with the courage to deny such accusations. On the other hand there were some who, after openly admitting that they were witches, continued to offend the community by announcing that they planned to remain witches for the rest of their lives. One old woman from the Downstream area had fled to Diitabiki after being threatened with a lynching. During her examination she confessed, and had then been



Figure 23 Akalali's secretaries. The names of witches and victims are written in chalk on the plank (Nyun Kondee, 1974).

“burned” by Akalali. Although now theoretically cleansed of all her evil by the boon, she kept grumbling and muttering defiantly that she kept her wisi in an old pan and had no intention of parting with it. People did not pay attention to her: she was old and harmless and now “disarmed.”

Why did so many submit voluntarily to such abasement, and why did they allow such a painful ritual to be inflicted upon them? Why did they flock to Akalali’s village and risk public disgrace? The answer is twofold. With the stream of people going to the prophet’s village steadily rising, the safest course of action was to join it. Whatever ostracism a forced confession might bring, not going would bring even worse and more immediate sanctions. Those who refused keli were gossiped about, and as in any village society, gossip is the most effective and feared of social controls. Careful accounts were kept of who had been screened and who had not. In the Diitabiki area in 1974 for instance, people knew exactly which of the Upstream villages’ elders had been screened. There was much whispering about one particular Captain who was still dragging his feet. Refusal to submit to Akalali’s screening, or a refusal by the prophet to cleanse some particular suspect, could trigger ostracism by the entire village community: no one would share a meal, a hunt, or even a brief chat with that individual.

The second reason for submitting to the keli was that anyone “cleared” by Akalali could not be touched by the folks back home, and even those who had been “burned” lost the stigma of being wisiman—at least for the time being. The Ndyuka believe that true witches are never fully converted, but the expectation was that, thanks to Akalali, they had lost their malevolent powers for at least a few years. Thus relief was general, and marked Akalali’s campaign as a success. For many, no doubt, Akalali’s ritual also meant rehabilitation—they had been persistently suspected and now the prophet restored them to *waka leti opu sama*, the ranks of the honest and upright.

Here are our impressions, recorded in 1974, of the keli and the purification by fire:

January 3, 1974

When we arrive at Nyun Kondée at 7:30 A.M., Akalali is busy consulting. He is in full array, wearing a long white robe with strips of red cloth and bells sewn on, the same robe that he wears during possession. He also wears sunglasses and a hat. He is seated on a new folding chair, behind a table on which his paraphernalia are displayed: a long bundle wrapped in red, a hand bell, bottles of rum and beer. Three flags are posted around the table, and against one of these the red sacred bundle rests [see fig. 20, p. 196]. The deliberations going on concern a divorce. Akalali wants to dissolve one of his marriages. A child born from this marriage had recently died, and the prophet attributes this to the disrespect his in-laws

accord him. As is customary, the lanti, a group of elders who are not themselves party to the dispute, requests him to change his decision, to show clemency. Akalali does not relent. He responds in an authoritarian tone he does not commonly assume. Rather abruptly he takes the hammer and knocks the tops of three bottles of beer: a sign that he considers the discussion ended. The palaver is adjourned and the elders withdraw unobtrusively.

After this Akalali changes in dress and demeanor. All paraphernalia are carried back into his house. He has donned simple clothes: trousers, jacket, and a felt hat. He signals that people waiting elsewhere in the village can now be called for the examination ritual. His basiya (assistants) see to it that they line up properly. The prophet seats himself. Thelma, the wife who is now ranked first among his spouses, has placed her chair next to his. She is medium to *Magdu*, another redoubtable gadu,⁵ and assists her husband in detecting wisiman. The screening takes place in a small square. A narrow sand path leads to it; there is a stick hung horizontally at chest level to bar the way at its end. Here a basiya is posted to supervise the correct placement of each person. In order to pass the barrier, adults are forced to bow their heads. Apart from being a sign of deference, this slows down the procession and helps the assistant regulate the flow of clients. The prophet's walking stick stands upright in the sand next to the fence; it is considered a sort of watchman that assists the prophet in detecting evil. When the ceremony is over, Akalali will personally cleanse the stick with a sprinkling of beer. The people of Akalali's "administration" sit to the prophet's right. Two older assistants keep a tally: a chalked cross on a plank for every witch who has been "merely" contaminated; a line across another plank for each who is willfully "evil."

"Men first!" Akalali orders, "and women next." The men, dressed in their best clothes, take their places in line. One by one they pass before the prophet, his wife, and the assistants. Indicating a verdict, Akalali waves his hand quickly: a move to the left says "all right, nothing wrong with you," a gesture to the right means "something is not right." This does not necessarily mean that the person so designated is tainted with wisi, only that a closer investigation is called for. Some of those who present themselves for Akalali's inspection are difficult cases: these are ordered to keep moving or are told to stand motionless while the prophet stares into his felt hat, where the uninitiated see only a label. Prolonged inspection may mean that there is some difficulty in which the subjects are involved, for instance, that they do not live in harmony with their kinsmen or that they are suspected of having invoked ancestor spirits for the purpose of revenge. Some people thus singled out might be prone to witchcraft, although not accused of either "contamination" or the crimes of wisi. It may be that their attitudes make them security risks. In any case, the fact that they are singled out, there, for all to see, serves as a warning.

In some cases Akalali or one of his assistants will add: "Mend your ways, or things will turn out badly." When screening women, the prophet glances at his wife now and then for a cue.

On January 3 and 4, between 200 and 250 people arrived for screening. Among them were 23 suspects. The record tallied 14 crosses for those "contaminated" and 9 lines for "real witches." Those convicted were told to stand aside as a group. Though they tried not to betray any emotion, the experience was extremely humiliating. One woman in this group thanked the prophet profusely for his help. Akalali's assistants loudly instructed the witches to return the following day, for cleansing. They were also informed what payments would be required. The men should each bring fifty pieces of firewood and ten Surinamese guilders [then about \$5.00U.S.], the women a tin of rice and five guilders—but if short of rice they could bring fifteen guilders instead. Each of those convicted had to contribute a small bottle of kerosene and a new pangi (wrap-around skirt) immediately; payment of fines could wait. People dispersed quietly.

January 4, 1974

Although we have been warned to come early in the morning, "No later than 7:30!", Akalali has not yet risen. In the village many people are waiting for him. News spreads that the prophet is drinking his tea. On a day like this, every single action of the prophet arouses public interest, as if this were the Sun King's breakfast. Rumor has it that the spirit has so far not manifested itself. But there are as many rumors as there are tongues, and no one would dare ask Akalali for his schedule. Shortly afterwards the true reason for the delay is revealed: Akalali is waiting for his Captain's salary to be paid to him.⁶ An assistant of the District Commissioner has arrived in the village, and Akalali has no intention of leaving for his forest shrine [where the "burning" will take place] before he is paid. But the Commissioner's assistant, a Creole from Paramaribo, does not intend to leave the village without securing Akalali's promise that he will be given a ritual bath before he returns to the Coast. A few days later, when we are in Akalali's village again, we see the entire District Commissioner's staff [charged with disbursements] being ritually washed and blessed by Akalali's assistants.

Akalali's financial affairs are settled around 10:30 and we prepare for departure. Those who have to undergo the purification ritual gather at the boat landing near the prophet's house, to be taken upstream to Gaan Tabiki, the island where the ritual will take place. People leave in small groups, filling ten or fifteen outboard-powered canoes and as many smaller ones that will be paddled. Other boats from other villages join us on the way. Our destination is about half-an-hour-paddling upstream from Kisai, the nearest village.

Once we land on the island, everyone waits for the prophet to arrive. Lookouts shout that his canoe has been spotted, and soon the sound of chiming bells can be heard echoing across the broad water. First Akalali sets foot ashore, then the others land, carrying his sacred bundle and his cane. People follow him, all dressed in their best clothes. Many take off their shoes when they go ashore on this sacred island. Young men start sweeping the ground within the compound of the two shrines. One shrine is dedicated to the *Goon Gadu* [the God of this Place, its "genius loci"]; without this deity's permission the spot cannot be used for anything of importance or permanence. The second is the more important shrine. It is called a *Gadu Bon* [God's Tree] but more specifically—for many trees are spirit dwellings—it is a *magwenu*, a resting place for spirits or for those aspects of spirits that are evil, or simply too dangerous to be brought within the human community.

We were told that some particularly perilous parts of Saantigoon Futuboi, Akalali's possessing spirit, stayed here on this deserted island, to be mobilized only in an emergency. Just as in the case of Dominiki's *magwenu* (called *Akomwai*), the tree hosts a small number of other spirits that the main one has drawn into his service. Some of these are, predictably, *Ampuku*, others are ghosts of ancestors who have associated themselves with the *Ogii* cult. The *magwenu* is a sort of territorial trap or pen for evil spirits; they are drawn to it, forever to remain fixed in that particular spot and its immediate neighborhood. Most prophets, perhaps all, have their *magwenu*. *Wensi* certainly had one.

Libations are poured at both shrines. In the meantime, *basiya* distribute strips of palm leaves that are collected again by another assistant to record how many people are participating. It appears that 188 people are present, among them ten men and twenty women who are to be "burned." Probably some cases from earlier examinations have been added to yesterday's group. Akalali rejects a request from some elders to examine additional persons before starting his purification ritual because, in his opinion, they've had plenty of opportunities in the preceding weeks.

Now the actual purification starts. The *basiya* call in all those who have to be cleansed, and they come forward with their *pangi* and bottles of kerosene. In the boats on the way to the island, these people were relaxed enough to chat among themselves, but now stress is evident. The *basiya* deal with that in a quietly effective manner: they advise the clients to remove all their outer garments because these are sure to be ruined during the ritual. All those who are to undergo the boon strip down to swimming trunks or to an old *pangi*.

Again men come first; one by one they bow their heads to pass under the symbolic barrier when an assistant instructs them to do so, just as happened during the examination. Silent and tense they walk up to the spot where the burning is to take place, and sit down on a heap of green leaves. Behind them stands a *basiya*

armed with a stick; he is there to prevent the victim from running away. No one we see, however, attempts this. For each "case" a new rag is drenched in kerosene and tied to a stick slanted into the soil so that the cloth hangs over the client's back. Assistants light the cloth close to the ground. A huge flame suddenly leaps up. The heat can be felt several meters away; it is so close to the skin it must be very painful. The client jerks reflexively forward, away from the burning cloth. The *basiya* shouts: "Stay where you are!" but makes no serious attempt to keep the person in place. The audience—most of whom are young—enjoys the spectacle; there is ill-suppressed laughter. People crane their necks to see if pieces of the burning cloth will fall on the naked backs. If so, this will indicate that the one being treated is *en seefi meke*, thus a self-made or "true" witch. Occasionally pieces of smoldering cloth actually do hit clients, but we observe no skin burns.

Akalali and his assistants explain time and again: "This is not to hurt you but to purify you."

The ritual is in fact seen as another ordeal: if the wind should blow the falling pieces aside, it would signify that others have contaminated the client, and therefore that he or she should not be condemned too strongly. If this ordeal corresponds to the results of the earlier *keli*—after all, Akalali had already divided suspects into two classes—then that agreement is widely discussed and the prophet is praised. If, however, pieces of burning cloth hit a "contaminated person" then another conclusion is quickly reached: this is no semi-innocent but a shrewd witch who knows how to escape detection until the very last moment. But in neither case does Akalali single out the suspect for further punishment.

After the "burning" all patients are cooled off: water is splashed over their backs, and they receive a *wasi* (ritual bath) with a potion of herbs and *pemba* [kaolin, a white clay]. Now the assistants are trying to reassure the clients: "You see how you suffered no harm? Your innocence saved you." Most clients try not to show fear when they have to sit under the kerosene-drenched rag, but a ten-year-old girl cries miserably as she walks to the burning place. She dodges away from the flames, and the *basiya* lets her go. One man is obviously very ill: he looks feeble and emaciated; his relatives have to help him along. An old woman, unable to walk, having no crutches and perhaps no relatives willing to help her, manages to reach the spot by pushing herself forward with the help of a low stool.

These were heartrending sights, and the giggling glee among the spectators caused an uncanny feeling of being back in the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Europe of witch crazes. Afterward, when we discussed these and other aspects of the "burning" with reliable informants, we were told that many sick people came out of their own free

will, mostly because they attributed healing power to the ritual. Among those who had already undergone the boon once, some begged Akalali to be allowed to participate a second time, expecting to be strengthened through the cleansing powers of the fire. But we, knowing the Ndyuka witchcraft idiom with its distrust of the chronically ill and weak, surmise that social pressure and continued suspicions directed against the poor played more of a role than "free will" in inducing individuals to undergo "burning" more than once.

After the last client has been purified, several of the young men who accompanied Akalali this morning request an examination for themselves. They argue that they did not have the chance before, and that they are soon to depart for the coast again so that they won't lose their jobs. They stress they would be grateful to Akalali if they could leave in a state of grace: they are, after all, returning to the hardships that face all those who have to live and work among strangers. Akalali shows himself persuaded by these arguments. An ad hoc keli is organized near the forest shrine. This time Akalali makes short work of the examination: one by one the migrant laborers are waved away to the "good" side. Only one case of contamination is exposed, and that man is in luck. It is now about one o'clock and the rains have come early today. A strong wind blows the smoldering pieces of cloth far from the client's bare back.

✓ Very few of those present show surprise at the keli's results for this last group. "Of course there are no true witches among young people gainfully employed! Who should they be jealous of?" This rhetorical question is put to us when we bring up the slipshod manner in which this second examination ritual has been conducted. It demonstrates once again what the Ndyuka believe to be the source of witchcraft: jealousy.

Another matter is raised: the case of an old man from Godoolo, widely considered to be a notorious witch. The community blames him for the sudden death of his own granddaughter, and other recent deaths have also been laid at his door. He has become Godoolo's scapegoat. Earlier this man had refused to be "burned" even though Akalali had summoned him more than once. Now when the Godoolo people beg Akalali to "help them this time with this man" [to cleanse him with fire], the prophet becomes angry. He dismisses them by ordering the old reprobate, who waits in his boat at the landing, to be taken back to his village. As far as Akalali is concerned, he has washed his hands of the matter. Akalali's judgment virtually amounts to an ex-communication, people tell us. It sends the old man to Coventry; henceforth no one will share food with him, no one will come over to his place for a chat; he will have nowhere to go but the wilderness.

Now the rain starts pouring down, and the company grows eager to finish its deliberations and leave. Prayers are hurried through at the two shrines and everybody rushes to the boats to return to the prophet's village of Nyun Kondée. There, under con-

stant bell ringing, the prophet's paraphernalia are placed back in the temple. Basiya are posted in the temple square; they hand out necklaces of white cotton cloth to all the purified.

LEADERS CHANGE; WITCHES DO NOT

Like any other elements of culture, patterns of witchcraft evolve. Since 1972, open witchcraft accusations against living persons have become possible again. In 1974 we obtained data on 113 "burned" individuals, including name, gender, and approximate age. It shows that Akalali (no doubt guided by public opinion) stuck to the mainstream Ndyuka beliefs on this subject: the *den seefi meke* or "true" witch is usually old and more likely to be a woman. Roughly 74 out of 87 diagnosed true witches were female. Males scored higher in the *den poli en* or "contaminated" category: 12 men against 14 women. In view of the prevailing gender ratio on the Tapanahoni at the time—roughly two men for every five women—it was hardly surprising that the number of women who had to undergo the cleansing ritual was higher. But that would not explain why the number of true witches among women was six times that of men. Older people (defined as those over 50) were also more likely than younger Ndyuka to be classed as *den seefi meke*: out of 87 true witches of both sexes, 59 were in the older age category. Of the 67 older persons who had to be cleansed by fire, only eight (12 percent) were *den poli en*.

AKALALI AND HIS FOLLOWERS

When he was not "on duty," the prophet carried himself in an unassuming manner that was widely appreciated. People commended him for it, saying, "he respects ordinary people," "he doesn't act like a big shot," and "he is just like you and me." This democratic image did not extend to the periods when he was in trance. Although his spirit usually manifested itself in a quiet way, everybody anticipated sudden and violent shifts in his mood. When in a state of possession his toes could be seen to press the earth until they almost disappeared into the sand, indicating the "heaviness" of his *gadu*. No one doubted his total commitment to his spiritual mission; his single-mindedness could be frightening for onlookers to behold. It was certainly expected that people who lived in his village or visited there would hold his spirit in awe. When Akalali was in trance, children were not allowed to run around, women could not pound rice or bake manioc, and dogs should not bark; a respectful silence was to reign throughout the village. Anyone who irritated him at such a time was likely to be fiercely punished.

Yet, even when he was *not* possessed, some often very minor things might upset Akalali. When one of his wives broke his favorite

teacup, he threw a tantrum that frightened witnesses. When his boat was coming to the island opposite Diitabiki, where a clinic run by Outsiders is situated, he spied the little black dog of the Dutch nurse. Akalali glowered at it, his eyes narrowed. People said: "Now you look on the evil side of the gadu!" They told us that black dogs were anathema to Saantigoon Futuboi. But when Akalali looked pointedly away, not deigning to acknowledge the animal, people said: "The evil side won't show itself here, it considers this place 'foreign' territory."

Relatively harmless though such behaviors may appear, within their cultural context they indicate a dangerous temper. They suggest that beneath the prophet's unpretentiousness and generally placid demeanor, Akalali the man had difficulty controlling his simmering rage between bouts of possession. He let that rage vent, sometimes very nastily, during his searches for wisiman.

His successes at home encouraged the prophet's ambition. He proposed to demonstrate his power to city people by stopping all traffic accidents in Paramaribo for a week. Then, on the eighth day, he would withhold his protection. Unfortunately, this wonderful project never materialized because his relatives declared themselves against it: "Akalali would strain himself too much doing this, and for what? So what if people in Paramaribo have no faith in him? Who cares?" Akalali assured us, in person, that he had grown resigned to the fact that family can sometimes cost you the most wonderful opportunities.

VICTORY

Akalali had less success in exporting his witch cleansing campaign to the Pamaka Maroons of the middle Marowijne River. Considerable discontent surfaced there about Akalali's selection of clients for the boon. People complained that he had overlooked a number of notorious witches, while respectable people found themselves humiliated by being singled out as wisiman. The prophet defended himself by claiming that others had contaminated these good people, but this explanation did not satisfy everyone. Finally, Akalali demanded a young girl to wait on his spirit, which meant that she had to become one of Akalali's wives. After much opposition, her Pamaka relatives finally gave in and the girl was taken to Nyun Kondee a couple of weeks later. Still, this Pamaka interlude proved to be only a temporary setback when Akalali continued his journey to the Ndyuka in the coastal region.

It is tempting to compare the eager welcome Akalali's ideas received from the Ndyuka with the merely polite interest they received from the Pamaka. It is not that Pamaka culture provided its members with better ego defenses against Akalali's witchcraft accusations than the Ndyuka's did. Suffice it to say that Akalali was out of his depth, that to at least a portion of the Pamaka community it was

obvious that he was bluffing; he lacked the intimate familiarity with their social relationships that would have made such claims plausible.

On July 3, 1974, he arrived at Albina, seat of the District Commissioner for Marowijne and residence for hundreds of Ndyuka. The Paramaribo-based daily *De West* reported his "triumphal tour" and called him "spiritual leader of the Ndyuka." The newspaper mentioned a ceremonial welcome with *apenti* drums, a reception usually reserved for Paramount Chiefs. From this article it is clear that Akalali's fame had spread to Paramaribo. Undoubtedly, the editors of the paper, who maintained close links with the NPS, recognized the political assets the prophet represented and assumed that a spiritual leader could, if he so wished, swing the vote in several districts. Suriname was then only a single year from full independence. The NPS (a mainly Creole party in this ethnicity-based political system) feared that the VHS party (representing mostly the descendants of Hindu-Indian contract laborers) would opt for strong ties with the Netherlands. Akalali, the NPS hoped, could tip the balance by delivering the Tapanahoni district, and perhaps the coastal parts of the Marowijne districts as well.

The newspaper reported that Akalali was an iconoclast who had made an end to "wasteful offerings"; brought people to accept Christianity; taught Ndyuka to rely on their own inner strength instead of on "amulets"; and had been invited by Forster, the Pamaka Gaanman, to stop the superstitious veneration of obiya.

Never mind that actual events in the Pamaka region did not corroborate this; the emphasis on Akalali's iconoclasm was certainly not misplaced. Akalali had delivered a blow to the Gaan Tata religious regime from which, three decades later, it has not yet recovered. However, Akalali never attempted to rival Wensi in uprooting the spirit medium cults, the cornerstones of Ndyuka religious life. Akalali had well-delineated goals, but to prepare the ground for Christianity, as Wensi sometimes claimed to do, was never one of them. This part of the report in Suriname's main newspaper was apparently inspired by political or religious motives and wishful thinking.

But *De West* was accurate about the enormous enthusiasm for the prophet among Ndyuka living in Paramaribo and along the Coast. The first Cottica Tour of Akalali (July 1974) lives on as a moment of triumph in the memories of all those who participated in it. Great feasts of welcome were given at every village where the prophet's retinue chose to spend a night. One community after another begged him to search for witches. When Akalali held his boon at Moengo (a town connected by road with Paramaribo; see fig. 25, ch. 16), busloads of Ndyuka migrants arrived to solicit his spiritual help. None of our informants recalled hearing any disparaging comments about the results of his keli examinations. Akalali was on home turf here: this was no world of strangers as the Pamaka must have been, but a familiar region where many of his

clansmen had settled in the past. And because contacts between the Coast and the Tapanahoni were so frequent, Akalali had access to a lot of information on those who presented themselves to him for examination. Wherever he went on the Tapanahoni, he was feted. And as he had done among the Pamaka, he claimed a young woman for another wife.

Akalali was never invited by the Saamaka and Matawai Maroons (of central Suriname) to rid their villages of wisi. As far as we know, no witch cleansing operations were mounted among those people, and we never heard that the prophet succeeded in inciting great enthusiasm among them. In August 1975, he paid a brief visit by charter plane to the Matawai Gaanman, whom he treated for various afflictions. He returned to the Coast when the majority of Matawai elders (being Christians) declined his offer to launch an antiwitchcraft campaign in their villages.⁷

Akalali made several more trips to Paramaribo, usually to discuss political matters of the interior with the authorities. A Prime Minister and several members of his cabinet were reported to have requested his help in the medical field and for protection against witchcraft. Whether such nocturnal visits (they were invariably believed to have occurred under cover of darkness) actually took place, is hard to tell. But what is certain is that high government officials and cabinet ministers regularly consulted Akalali, indicating the high esteem the Ndyuka prophet enjoyed during that period (1972–1976). He shared this honor with the stubborn Gaan Tata High Priest Amelikan, the only Ndyuka who dared to oppose Akalali publicly. Amelikan had managed to retain his contacts with the NPS leadership. In 1974, the Surinamese cabinet decided to promote Akalali from Captain to Head Captain (Ede Kabiten), an honor only rarely bestowed.⁸ During those years he was the only Head Captain in the Tapanahoni region.

THE EROSION OF AKALALI'S POWER

On April 7, 1976, the newspaper *De West* reported that Akalali's power was waning. It pointed to his "activities in the sexual field" as the main factor responsible for his loss of authority. What these "activities" involved was not specified, but they probably referred to Akalali's growing number of wives and, above all, the fact that he had acquired three of them by stealing them from their husbands. The article also suggested that Amelikan's star was on the rise and mentioned his visit to the capital (Amelikan was apparently the article's main source). At the time, this prediction must have seemed strange to most Ndyuka, for there were few if any signs of Akalali's imminent downfall. He rode herd on the Tapanahoni's elders. His word was law. His Nyun Kondée was thriving: new patients came in every day from every region of the interior. His services as a witch finder were in great demand.

But in the crucial year of 1975, when Suriname was divided over the issue of independence, Akalali ordered his followers to vote for the mainly Hindustani VHS party, and not for the predominantly Creole NSP. The VHS favored maintaining close ties to the old colonial power, the Netherlands. This was also Akalali's preference; he would lecture that it is better to deal with the devil you know than a devil whose malevolence you have yet to experience. He also admired the Hindustani for their business acumen. "Who own the shops in Paramaribo?" was one of his rhetorical questions whenever debating which party would best represent Maroon interests in Suriname's post-independence legislature.

Sometime during 1976, Paramaribo's NPS politicians must have decided they would be better served in supporting Amelikan and Gazon. The High Priest was known as an NPS stalwart, while the Gaanman at least did not support the opposition VHS. The NPS won the vote for independence with only the narrowest of margins, and the party leadership appeared not to have forgotten Akalali's political role in the months before the election. When, during 1975 and 1976, Akalali requested the newly independent government of Suriname to demote Chief Gazon and to install himself as the new Ndyuka Gaanman, the government openly refused. That signal was noted, discussed, and weighed in Ndyuka political circles: apparently Akalali was no longer an important political ally but only a liability in the eyes of the Creole politicians who held certain powers over the tribe. Meanwhile, some Ndyuka who were on the payroll of the NPS "to make propaganda" (as they themselves candidly put it) had received instructions to discredit Akalali and to organize opposition against him. ✓

Opposition from the city may have accelerated but should not be seen as the main reason for Akalali's downfall. That, it now appears to Ndyuka eyes, grew from much older seed. In the early years of the movement, Akalali's purification by fire was universally considered a great improvement. But by 1976 the tide had turned: two prominent shamans defected from the prophet's following and many Ndyuka were openly questioning the efficacy of Akalali's new ritual. One skeptic, the same person who had greeted us in 1973 with "This is a new world," expressed only doubts this time. "How can Akalali ever hope to bring an end to wisi?" he asked rhetorically.

Witches are like gods in their power. Witches? Evil! We are talking about dangerous things here. This is not children's work! Akalali and his silly burning. Did he burn their hands? The answer is no. Did he burn their *boo fu ati* [hearts]⁹ He did none of these things! Yet he claims to have brought witchcraft to an end. Akalali offered us a fake, and nothing more than that. I am tired of this Akalali business.

As the prophet's declining fortunes became apparent to most people, dramatic stories of his fall from grace began to circulate. A good

example is this episode: "Akoyoo's house [Akoyoo was a clansman and devoted follower of Akalali] burned to the ground. It was a roaring fire. Five hundred guilders in banknotes were lost. Akoyoo himself was away, working in Akalali's gardens." Clearly the zone of protection, the state of grace that Akalali's possessing spirit had erected around his closest collaborators, was failing. Everybody knew what that meant.

One of the most common tales about Akalali's downfall deals with his journeys to Tebu, the mountain with a bald, granite peak that has fascinated Ndyuka ever since they first explored the Upper Tapanahoni region, and Saka's followers climbed it to find the Tebu gadu. Many Ndyuka have made long journeys upstream to the Tebu region for hunting and fishing; religious virtuosos do so, too, but claim that they make the trip only to further their knowledge of the occult. A man from the Gaanman's clan related this story to us, but later we heard it from several other sources as well.

Akalali made the journey three times. On the first trip, one of the elders accompanying him died. That caused great consternation. Never before had a Ndyuka died so far upstream, in Indian territory. On the second trip another elder died, again far beyond the last Ndyuka settlement. He died in his hammock without any visible ailment, a bad omen! Akalali's obiya, or perhaps the man himself, had fallen into *buuya* [a state of dys-grace, of supernatural disfavor]. On the third trip yet another accident occurred. One of Akalali's most trusted assistants fell while climbing Tebu, ringing his hand bell. If it hadn't been for an old medicine man, the assistant never would have recovered. Because, you know, that's the thing: Tebu and *buuya* are incompatible. Akalali himself is responsible for creating this situation. He has repeatedly cursed the Otoo clan, old and young, men and women. He even solicited evil things to help him kill them off. The gods don't like such curses. This was the beginning of the end for Akalali.

In 1978, District Commissioner Richène Libretto, himself a Ndyuka, commented upon such tales of catastrophe: "This is what they say today, now that Akalali's power is waning. But what if he had still been on top? Then people would certainly blame these incidents on the wrath of Akalali's gadu, thinking they were triggered by some sin or mistake of the victims, or by their disobedience to his medium. No one would have thought of blaming Akalali." We agree with the Commissioner's view on this matter. Not until Akalali's position had been thoroughly eroded did people perceive the same facts differently.

ANOTHER ANTINOMIAN CULT

What struck us most during Akalali's reign was the freshness and power of Ogi's social imagery. In 1973, Ndyuka generally appeared

impressed by Akalali and his feasts and were awed by the deity. The Dikii myths were believed to contain the keys to secrets of a numinous nature. Ampuku spirit mediums flocked to Nyun Kondée as if it were a fountain of religious wisdom, while Akalali ruled the Ndyuka as a living god-king. Although the Ndyuka nation had experienced great changes during the 1950s and 1960s, and seemed much more integrated into the larger Suriname society, the "Akalali revolution" demonstrates the continuing significance of its ancient religious codes. Through his "exemplary behavior," Akalali, like Akule and Dominiki before him, demonstrated that he wanted to live in accordance with Ogi's dictates.

Akalali pursued legitimacy, but not through negotiations and compromises as Ogi's previous prophets had done. Instead, he sought unchallengeable dominance by overthrowing existing religious institutions and raising his flag over the conquered shrines "like a European general," as he himself described his strategy. He was more radical than any of his predecessors: he destroyed the Gaan Tata cult and overhauled the funerary rituals that occupied a central place in Ndyuka culture and that served as a significant mechanism for the redistribution of wealth. Yet, in some ways, Akalali was more conservative than some of his predecessors. His Nyun Kondée village was steeped in Ampuku lore and was home to many Ampuku medicine men and mediums. This orthodoxy extended toward other spirit medium cults as well. Akalali never instigated iconoclastic purges, as did the early Gaan Tata priests. But like those priests of the 1890s, he operated a witchcraft eradication campaign, "burning" hundreds of Maroons throughout the interior. None of his predecessors in the Ogi tradition ever mounted such a crusade or even attempted such investigations: "*They* didn't have a permit for them [for these witchcraft searches]," Akalali explained to us. He justified his frontal assault on the Gaan Tata shrines in a similar way: "I had a license to terminate their work, others could only come halfway." This shows again the crucial role of the concept of his "mission" or "assignment." The prophet felt obligated by his calling to reform an institution and in order to do so destroyed key shrines of the Gaan Tata cult. The belligerence he sometimes displayed in such sharp contrast to his usually affable behavior may have been a necessary reflection of that, and so, perhaps, was his treatment of some women and their husbands.

AKALALI'S END

The new world Akalali championed had lost its glitter. After the prophet fled the Tapanahoni region in 1979 to withdraw to his forest camp near Albina, Akalali's followers also returned to their old villages. In 1981, when we returned for further fieldwork, Nyun Kondée was already a desolate sight. Its houses, some still covered by corru-

gated iron roofs, lay abandoned and overgrown by the jungle. Nyun Kondee had gone the way of Dominiki's Akeekuna, Wensi's Siiba Kiiki, and all the other spiritual boomtowns of the past. Above its old main landing place there hung a sign:

Da Salen, the late Kabiten of Pikin Kondee, gave this place to Akalali.

Gaanman Gazon took it back. He is now the owner.

Notes

- ¹ It is unusual for an older generation of Ndyuka to know their year of birth. Akalali could be certain that he was born in 1924 only because a Chinese shopkeeper, then his father's employer, wrote it on a piece of paper.
- ² Da Asawooko, Diitabiki village, Misidyan clan, Dale bee.
- ³ Interview with Da Baya Matodja, Diitabiki village, Otoo clan (December 24, 1973).
- ⁴ Interview with Da Bono, Diitabiki village, Otoo clan (December 26, 1973).
- ⁵ Any ambiguity about Magdu's provenance and powers seems to be deliberately created and maintained.
- ⁶ In 1973, Akalali was made Captain by the Minister of the Interior, C. B. Ramkisoer, in Paramaribo. Clearly, his fame had spread to the world of the Outsiders, and our informants believed that his "promotion" was a belated attempt by national politicians to profit from establishing links with what was clearly the most powerful man in Ndyuka society.
- ⁷ Source: Chris de Beet and Miriam Sterman.
- ⁸ Source: André Pakosie.
- ⁹ The heart is also considered a center of consciousness. Thinking is done with the heart, according to Ndyuka philosophy (André Pakosie, personal communication).

Demons

Throughout most of the 1970s, Ogi's creed had provided many Ndyuka with an alternative worldview. The downfall of the prophet Akalali and his eviction from the Tapanahoni region did not eliminate their need for other perspectives; his exit signaled the beginning of a period of widespread experimentation with new forms of religious experience and the revival of ancient ones. Among the Ndyuka of the Cottica region, however, a quite different situation prevailed. On two separate occasions, in 1978 and 1981 (two years before his death in 1983), Akalali had officially recognized André Pakosie as an avatar of Ogi. Akalali remained medium of Saantigoon Futuboi, but we are not aware of any activities of his exceeding those of a village shaman. His last years were spent inconspicuously in his forest camp near the coastal town of Albina. Pakosie showed himself as much more ambitious when he began building a rejuvenated Ogi cult. Pakosie founded Sabanapeti, a new spiritual center on the Albina-Moengo road, and made a tour through most Ndyuka villages and settlements in the Cottica region, where he searched for witches,¹ and provided religious and medical assistance. But south of the Coast, in the Tapanahoni and adjacent areas of the Marowijne and Lawa Rivers, new social imageries flourished in a world no longer controlled by the traditional religious organizations. The new demonology that has evolved in the last few decades is a case in point.

A CANON TO DEFEND

"Evil lurks at the margins of society," Mary Douglas argues (1966:144–145), and this is certainly true of Ndyuka demons. In the complex of religious ideas about evil that had developed by the end of the nineteenth century, witches held the most prominent place. But immediately below them in the hierarchy of nefarious spiritual forces came bakuu, the demons—harbingers and symbols of alien and uncon-

trolled supernatural domains. As far as can be ascertained, demons were not heard of among Ndyuka, at least not in the Tapanahoni heartland, until the opening decades of the twentieth century.

In villages along the Tapanahoni, the prevailing view until recently was that demons are the very epitome of evil. This belief was upheld by village elders, political officeholders, and both Gaan Tata's and Ogi's priests. It was enforced by the practice of ritual exorcism. This is a singular phenomenon in African-American cultures, where distinctions between good and evil as absolute categories are rarely made, as Herskovits (1958:73, 242) noted many years ago. Among Suriname's coastal Creoles, for instance, no such radical practice as the casting out of demons exists.

The Ndyuka, however, for long periods of their history, have looked upon this complex of ideas and practices as a canon: a demon is evil and the threat implied in demonic seizures can be contained.² Bakuu were defined as unworthy of any treatment, good only for exorcism. But in the frontier areas where gold miners and bounty hunters mixed with Ndyuka boatmen, demons were not a rare occurrence, and the first cases of demonic possession were reported in this "Wild West" area of Ndyuka society. Official reports written in the 1920s bear witness to the ravages caused by demonic seizures of Ndyuka men and women who lived and worked there.

The picture or representation of the bakuu has an African ring; the creatures belong to the class of "little people," which is well documented in the ethnographic literature of that continent. Darkly colored, about three feet high, they roam the forest, their natural habitat. When left to their own pursuits—hunting with the help of small forest animals kept like hunting dogs—they cause no harm to humans. When molested, annoyed, or thwarted however, they may strike out reflexively and injure a trespasser grossly, quite out of proportion to the offense. Though not evil by nature, bakuu are easily employed to harm humans. The oldest stories of bakuu invasion tell us about French Creole employers who, when hiring Ndyuka boatmen, felt cheated and took revenge by sending a bakuu. The classic story is one where the Creole employer learned that his bagasiman deliberately created an "accident" in the rapids. When the Ndyuka boatmen reported the loss of their cargo to him, their employer, who had already consulted a diviner, knew that the boatmen had secretly returned to the place of the "accident" to recover most of his goods, and then sold them to gold miners. While acting as if he believed that his cargo was irretrievably lost, this Creole quietly purchased a bakuu and sent the little monster to the boatmen's relatives. The bakuu then acted like a fury, killing, maiming, and spreading illness in the families of the bagasiman after first possessing one of the thieves, or the wife of a relative. In contrast to a fury or kunu, a bakuu's effect is not

restricted to one or a few closely related matrilineal groups. It would, for instance, attack the boatmen's children with as much determination as it did their sister's sons.

For many decades the royal solution to the problem was a journey to Gaan Tata's oracle where the bakuu medium would be freed from the evil spirit through exorcism, and the thieves fined. Wisiman were responsible for the coming of a second group of bakuu. Without any justification, these witches would hire the services of bakuu. Lacking in sense or moral discrimination, the demon might be won over with relatively small gifts to perform heinous crimes. Some drinks, some food, and a few coins and pieces of colored cloth were all that were needed to persuade a bakuu to assault anyone pointed out as an intended victim. *Bai bakuu* or *bai wisi* (buy a demon or buy witchcraft) used to be the name for this willful calling upon evil powers. In the wider category of the modi operandi of the wisiman, bai bakuu was only one of those. Others might include poisoning and vampire attacks.

Invasion by a bakuu causes illness and, if untreated, death. Or it can gradually turn the afflicted into a witch through spiritual contagion and degeneration. In the 1960s, this type of witchcraft was considered the most dangerous of the various methods for causing harm by supernatural means, and the most potent rituals of the Gaan Tata cult were deployed to fight the evil and expel the demon. The creatures were referred to as either bakuu (demons) or takuu sani (evil things). Reference to a "Devil's Pact" was conscious and common. Although related to those other forest spirits, the Ampuku, and sharing some traits with them, the bakuu stand out as the cause of other specific dangers.³

Some disparate notions are brought together in the image of the bakuu. Apart from its infantilism (as indicated by size) there is a suggestion of inadequate control over aggressive impulses. Both elements are acknowledged as "native" (indigenous or African), but there is also an association with foreign elements. These are symbolized by the notion of "things," as something mechanical, lacking the naturalness and versatility of an adult personality. We once showed people a picture, from *Time* magazine, of a monkey ready to be sent into outer space, with all sorts of gadgets, wires, and equipment tied to its little body. That caused quite a stir: people called each other to come and see the photograph of "a true bakuu!"

The notion of buying is central to the idea of a bakuu: a demon's help can only be secured by offering it goods bought in shops. This tallies with informants' statements implying that the first demons were not indigenous but imported from the outside world. As we have seen, early in last century, the entrepreneurs engaged in the gold and rubber trades allegedly protected their possessions with demons, and any Ndyuka who had deceived the businessmen they worked for by steal-

ing their goods would find themselves saddled with the evil forces hidden in the treasure. The effects of bakuu invasions were terrifying: in the 1920s many cases were reported of Ndyuka men plagued by bouts of insanity that proved resistant to every form of ritual treatment. These forms of derangement, characterized by uncontrolled aggressiveness, were attributed to bakuu (van Lier 1944).

In the 1960s, this was no longer true. Insanity was, in fact, extremely rare. As a rule, bakuu affliction involved women, and those were mainly from the Downstream villages of the Tapanahoni. Some were brought to Diitabiki for treatment, where their spirit affliction was recognized as quite different from that of other types of mediumship in that bakuu victims were literally unable to benefit from treatment. They did not respond appropriately to any element of the ceremony but instead uttered raucous cries, rolled wildly over the ground, and seemed incapable of interacting in any meaningful sense with the priests or shamans. Thus, after repeated but futile attempts to have the invading spirit state its message, the diagnosis of bakuu possession was arrived at and the spirit was driven out.

All invading spirits except bakuu are expected to carry important messages for the afflicted person, and possibly even for the wider community. Since communicating with them proved impossible, demons were assumed to be deaf and dumb "things," nonpersons incapable of uttering a single, intelligible word, and therefore fit only for exorcism. That ritual, recorded in detail elsewhere (Thoden van Velzen 1966a:156ff.), implicitly underlined this perspective, treating the afflicted person as a victim and the intruding agency as an entity to be punished with expulsion. These ideas were legitimized by Gaan Tata's priests. In those days, no attempts were made to try and have a bakuu state its name and purpose, nor name the one who allegedly sent it.

A DEMON CRAZE

During the 1970s, when the prophet Akalali was still the most powerful man in Ndyuka society, a small army of demons manifested itself in Downstream villages of the Tapanahoni. But Akalali evidenced no more patience with these creatures than the Gaan Tata priests had: "When I enter a village, demons run for cover," he used to say.

The bakuu plague appears to have been strongly associated with the new economic situation in Suriname, with large-scale labor migration, with the exodus of thousands of Maroons to the capital Paramaribo and, above all, with growing economic inequalities. Prosperity caused envy and distrust. Many a successful migrant was suspected of having concluded a "demon contract," of buying these evil creatures to promote his business or eliminate rivals. Such bakuu basi (demon masters, or "masters" as we will call them here) are assumed to have

economic objectives. Many people openly speculate that all migrants have a close association with demons. A telling detail revealing the link with a booming but uncertain economic world is the casual reference to demons as "money machines." But hiring evil spirits as your money machine is not without risks, for sooner or later any demon will make unexpected demands on his master. He may, for example, threaten to withhold his services until he receives a human life as an offering (Lenoir 1973:140). But after having tasted human flesh, the evil creatures lose their usefulness. The same is true if a master turns a demon loose on his fellows. From that moment on the bakuu is unfit for ordinary work.

There are cases in which a demon "jumps" a master's kinsman who is not aware of the master's demon contract until later, often much too late. The fate of Atyado, a Ndyuka migrant, and his relatives is a case in point. Atyado bought two demons in Paramaribo from a Hindustani man—a male and a female bakuu. The two demons worked hard and tirelessly. Whatever job Atyado took, whether it was building a house or a boat or cutting a subsistence garden, he always finished it more quickly than anyone else. People opined that demons were responsible for Atyado's success. When Atyado was dying he confided in his sister and bequeathed the two demons to her. She could certainly use the gift, for she was a widow and had to fend for herself. The demons worked to her full satisfaction, but in the meantime they had propagated, giving birth to six male and six female young bakuu. Lacking the means to lodge all these creatures, Atyado's sister sent the demon children to her relatives, many of whom soon fell prey to demonic possessions. On her deathbed, Atyado's sister confessed she had sent these uninvited and dangerous assistants. Her relatives were not grateful; some argued that they had no work for demons because they already had a breadwinner. Others, not being gainfully employed themselves, asked of what use demons could be to them?⁴

During the last decades of the twentieth century—and in contrast to established dogma and practice at Gaan Tata's oracle—people distinguished two classes of demon mediums: those believed to have purposely established a relationship with a bakuu and those who became involuntarily possessed by one. Accusing someone of belonging to the first category, that of the masters, is tantamount to an accusation of witchcraft. Those so accused are usually male and few in number. The "victim" category, people claiming to be possessed by a demon sent by someone else, encompasses many more individuals, and most of these are female. Until recently, demon possession was a rare occurrence, and such malevolent spirits were immediately exorcized, never to be heard from again. Nowadays few exorcisms are held, and they seldom work well. Although "victims" do not try to hide that they have been invaded by a bakuu, they appear to cherish their mediumship—per-

haps evidencing the same sort of perverse pride exhibited by a busy middle manager who is nursing an ulcer.

Clearly the Ndyuka's link with city life is much more complicated than indicated by the traditional revulsion against people who sell their souls for a money machine. The ethnography of the demon epidemic has taken two directions based on how the victims behave. Fieldwork reports conducted mainly in the 1970s stress the ambivalence of victims toward the new wealth that became available to Ndyuka communities in the interior (Green 1974; Lenoir 1973; Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 2001; Vernon 1980, 1985). In these studies, the Ndyuka show their fear of the new relationships among affluent migrants, as well as their own fascination with the glamour and opulence of city life. However, reports from anthropologists working a decade later strike a more gloomy note. Details about fascination with city life are not absent, but the bakuu are pictured as killers rather than as moneymakers (van Wetering 1992).

A SOPHISTICATED DEMON

It is from the iconography and from the *mise-en-scène* or enplotment⁵ of the demon drama that we learn what was at stake during the 1970s. Most of the icons one meets in the demon dramas of those years had never before been associated with such creatures. The language, for example, reeled off by the new demons is Sranantongo, a Creole spoken on the Coast, mutually intelligible with the Creole of the Ndyuka Maroons, but clearly different. For most Ndyuka, Sranantongo was the language of sophisticated city people, and it had a higher prestige for the younger generation than the idiom spoken by the rustics back home. Pronunciation and intonation of the spirit language used by mediums were those of radio announcers (Vernon 1980:21). Occasionally, demons had a grasp of Chinese, the language of many shopkeepers. Today the great majority of demon mediums are female. In the heydays of river transport (1885–1920) the role of men was pivotal; males were then the main actors of the demon drama. But this aspect of the iconography has changed as well. Some mediums, who are willing to tell what their demon looks like, describe a light-colored Creole child or a doll in pretty city clothes (Vernon 1980:4). This new form of demonic possession is thus explicitly linked to the urban lifestyle, and the glamour that surrounds it in the eyes of the population of the hinterland. But the drama also strikes a note of caution: the demons' appetite for sweets is regarded as insatiable—they will eat great quantities of sugar, even a barrel-full (Lenoir 1973:139–140).

The enplotment is even more revealing. Vernon (1980, 1985) offers telling examples from a Ndyuka village on the Tapanahoni River at the end of the 1970s. The drama started when a boat with returning

migrants approached their home village in the interior. A female passenger changed her city dress for the pangi, the traditional wrap-around skirt. At the boat landing, she suddenly jumped on the sandy beach, ran toward the village, and expressed her demon mediumship through violent gestures and language. Other women from the village, demon mediums themselves, joined her. Moments later, a serious conflict erupted. A young woman who accompanied the newly arrived medium on her tour through the village disclosed in trance that she had been invaded by a demon sent by her uncle.

The accused had lived in Paramaribo for many years before returning to his natal village in old age. The woman, or rather her spirit, accused the old man of having killed seven persons with the assistance of a couple of demons he had bought in Paramaribo. The progeny of these evil spirits had been swarming out all over their kin group. Although the old man rejected the accusations, the village elders reprimanded him sternly. The situation threatened to get truly out of hand when the group of demon mediums assaulted the man with sticks. A lynching was barely prevented by the elders and other bystanders. When barred from beating the suspect, the mediums continued their tour of the village, clamoring for soda pop, sweets, and other goods sold in village shops (Vernon 1980:29). Small wonder that elders are wary of returning migrants. They used to give them a warm welcome, while at the same time warning people that the migrants' boat could bring unwanted cargo: bakuu, they claimed, could be hiding like cockroaches among the city goods (31).

These new forms of demonic possession had some characteristics in common. As most mediums are female, the demon drama gave women a central place. Although they had a close association with demons themselves, these women pointed an accusing finger at males. Men, driven by greed, were responsible for the first, decisive purchases. Women were victims, properly speaking. Also new is the assertiveness and even aggressiveness of females. Demon mediums often produced an endless stream of words and would not bear contradiction. Mediums demanded consumer goods from shops. While in trance, mediums dared to accuse others of witchcraft, breaking one of this society's strongest taboos—it is never proper, and it is even sinful, to charge living persons with such a crime unless one has the authority of an Akalali. More than once Vernon reports witnessing assaults by mediums on men and women suspected of witchcraft. Not everyone was favorably impressed. One village headman called the mediums "little ladies who run around the village with winti [spirits] screaming in their heads trying to kill people" (1980:29).

The dependence of this type of possession on the urban milieu is evident. The first manifestations of demonic possession occur, as a rule, on setting foot in the native village, often before there has even

been a chance to change from urban attire into traditional dress. The trigger may be the possessed's realization that the future now promised little beyond the relative deprivation of a subsistence economy. Vernon offers us this reaction by a woman who was a demon medium: "This thing they call money is a terrible thing. As soon as you see it, your whole body begins to tremble" (1980:15).

Lastly, a significant element in the iconography is the fact that bakuu act collectively, in gangs or packs. In the past this element was missing from stories about demons; sealing a pact with a bakuu was then regarded as a solitary undertaking. This proliferation of the evil spirits may have been implicit in the first such transactions in the city, as was true in Atyado's case. He bought a male and a female demon, a breeding pair who soon propagated. Lenoir (1973:139) reports the case of a Pamaka Maroon who was suspected of having purchased demons in bulk. Vernon's (1980:16) Ndyuka informants told her that they had observed a group of twelve demons sneaking between houses. A renowned shaman had to step in to knock them off the roof with a stick. Green's (1974:254–256) case study of a demon drama among the Matawai Maroons reveals the preference of demons for working in gangs. Years after the onset of that drama, six of the gang's original group of bakuu were still active. Although all histories start with a contract between a purchaser (master) and one or two demons, their number often increases at high speed—like a malicious growth that rapidly forms secondary tumors within the social fabric.

It is not always clear how a particular representation of evil spirits is related to the pattern of economic and social change. Take, for instance, the last issue—the explosive reproduction of bakuu. Is this a comment on the social flux caused by migration and urbanization, or is it an expression of the contagiousness of demonic possession? We cannot be sure, but there certainly is a link between rapid economic change and the rise of new, striking images of viciously irresponsible antisocial entities.

DEMONS AS KILLERS

In the early 1990s the lure of city life was still clearly evident in demon dramas. During one particular séance, van Wetering (1992:123) heard a particularly dangerous spirit call himself "Jemissie Whitewalk," a neat combination of "Johnnie Walker," "White Horse," and maybe even of "James Bond," a figure well-known from the video theatres that have sprung up in many Ndyuka villages. At any rate, the demon liked Scotch whiskey, the drink that sophisticated people in the city were rumored to be fond of.

But in daily life, the seductive aspects of city life seemed to be losing to the dangers that lurk in new social relationships. Van Wetering,

writing about a Ndyuka settlement on the lower Marowijne in the early 1990s, remarked on the “demon epidemic”:

Not only on more or less formal occasions but in daily conversations, demons would crop up any time. When washing dishes at the riverside or preparing manioc in the cooking sheds, at all places where women would gather, it would not be long before someone would volunteer a hair-raising story about horrors that had stricken some people, somewhere. And almost invariably, *bakuu* [demons] were involved. Thus, the threat of demonic interference in normal life was kept vivid. Also, interpretations involving *bakuu* were given about the things that happened here and now. (1992:118)

She spoke with two sisters who were almost the only females in their matrilineage who had *not* succumbed to demon mediumship; they pointed to the disasters that had struck their kin group, which they had fled. She concludes: “Most stories entail a sudden, unexpected death. It seems that cardiac failure, which appears to occur rather frequently, is interpreted in this manner. In these rumors, demons are systematically described as killers, not as the money machines they reputedly are” (1992:118). There is an element of theater about spirit possession that is lost neither on the observing outsider nor on the native audience, which indeed is one of that audience’s standards for judging the performance’s validity. Like any play, possession involves actors, props, a plot, and a narrative.

A demon drama, part of a corpus of continuously reproduced myths, is told in a fantastic, archaic language. The narrative conveys a message that is masked, but intelligible to those willing to grasp its meaning. Demon beliefs speak about the attractions of the wider world, people’s fascination with them, and their fearful awareness of the mortal risks that attend the wealth they covet.

Both physically and socially, life in the interior is more demanding and less secure than in the city, especially for women. It is not surprising then that the young—especially young women—hunger to “escape” their home communities in the tribal areas for the Coast, French Guiana, or at least the border region. The Ndyuka population of St. Laurent du Maroni in French Guiana, for instance, has grown considerably in spite of French opposition to immigration from Suriname. But, as Sally and Richard Price (2003) have convincingly shown, whether the French like it or not, the western part of Guiana has been transformed by the illegals into a region where smuggling, uncertified gold mining, and other clandestine activities take place on a grand scale. Many new illnesses flourish in this milieu, including AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Women who lived in the makeshift settlements along the lower Marowijne could earn some money by producing foodstuffs such as

kwaka (dried cassava flour, a staple of the interior) for the emerging markets. This became quite profitable for those who lived relatively close to the Coast. But the demons riding women urged them to neglect all their other chores in favor of preparing this *kwaka*, and to spend their earnings on luxury goods. Yet their incomes were rarely impressive, and the women's increasingly strenuous efforts became a form of self-exploitation. That fatal heart attacks can strike active and apparently successful women is hardly news. Such was the fate, for instance, of Jemissie Whitewalk's medium. Nor is it surprising that in a society as preoccupied with social leveling and envy as the Ndyuka's, successful women are often reputed to harbor demons. So the *bakuu* "breed" or propagate, and the evidence of cardiac arrest teaches people that *bakuu* are killers indeed. Still, although the risks were clearly realized, the lure was too strong to be resisted. "With every transistor we buy we bring in a new demon," the elderly grumbled.

In the world beyond the tribal zone, a younger generation has learned to look down on the folks back home and to assume they no longer need their relatives. Kinship relations, once the backbone of Ndyuka society, have been weakened. This in turn unleashed reactions in the elder generation, which felt its way of life and its very survival were threatened. Their pervasive sense of insecurity was far from novel and stemmed from several sources. First, the stalemate in the struggle between the Gaan Tata priests and Akalali had left many people with doubts. Institutions had crumbled, the familiar ways of dealing with the world's evil had been declared obsolete, but no new institutions had replaced them. The civil war (1986–1992) greatly added to the confusion. Military reprisals against Ndyuka communities in the Cottica region caused some 8,000 Maroons to flee to French Guiana. Ideally, the resistance movement would have brought forth a framework for renewal, but that effort had lost its potential and its credibility even before 1992.

Some groups and individuals tried to counter the threat. In the border region between Suriname and French Guiana they founded new religious centers that catered to the demands of a new clientele: displaced Maroons. These were mainly Ndyuka, but with a sprinkling of Pamaka and Aluku. We visited two such centers on the eastern banks of the Marowijne and Lawa rivers. Ritual specialists in therapeutic "clinics" are general practitioners who boast a carry oracle for divination and treat a wide range of complaints. They are credited by their clientele in the surrounding settlements with powerful guardian spirits and are consulted on a range of problems. But their emphasis is on the fight against demons, and exorcism is their specialty.

The first center, which bears the proud name "Misalibi" (I shall live), is near Apatou on the Marowijne river. It is headed by a man who enjoyed high status in his native Tapanahoni village. The son of a

one-time Gaanman, he was therefore ineligible for succession in political office, and chose a shamanic career, not an unusual step for someone in his situation (Turner 1987:134, 370.) He is a medium for *Seiwenti*, an auxiliary force to Gaan Tata. In the turmoil of the 1970s he opposed Akalali's challenge to the Gaan Tata cult. Unable to change that situation, he chose exile, thereby protesting both the internal relations in Ndyuka society and the lamentable conditions then prevailing in Suriname. Misalibi was conceived as a bulwark against chaos, a bastion for the final stand against everything that has undermined "classic" Ndyuka culture: cowardly compromises, corruption, and decay.

HOW TO CATCH A DEMON

A group of women arrives at Misalibi camp, led by an old lady named Ma Mekemi who acts as suppliant and spokeswoman. She is the midwife of a neighboring settlement. Her pregnant, young daughter-in-law, Erna, is the patient. Erna hails from the Commewijne area in Suriname, where people are more affluent and "worldly" than in the makeshift settlements of the Marowijne. Her husband has left Erna in the care of her in-laws to await the baby's birth.

The group convenes at the central shrine, and the problem is put before the shrine keeper and therapist-founder of Misalibi. They are



Figure 24 Misalibi's carry oracle inspecting a group of patients (Misalibi, 1991).

here, the spokeswoman explains, because a state of *buuya*, of heightened susceptibility to supernatural danger, has emerged. Some ritual measures have already been taken to counteract the evil effects of angry words and hard feelings, but fears still linger that serious problems will occur with the delivery. The mother-to-be has shown a highly deplorable lack of respect toward the elder generation, whom she looks down on as "yokels from the boondocks." Erna's arrogance has angered the midwife's guardian spirit, *Da Someni*, the *Yooka* of a prominent village elder. To curb his anger, Erna offered him a *pangi* whereupon her in-laws declared that the spirit was now pacified.⁶ However, more trouble followed. Erna picked a quarrel with her mother-in-law's elder sister and actually fought with her, throwing the old lady to the ground. Consternation ensued. To avoid miscarriage, Erna had to pay her classificatory mother-in-law a fine. The risk of a miscarriage is never taken lightly, neither by the older nor by the younger generation.

This case was dealt with in stages. The first visit was dedicated to identifying the problem. Ritual remained restricted to the rendering of support: well wishing for a happy outcome. A week later the group returned. That morning, delivery had seemed to be near, but some spirit apparently had bothered the parturient woman and was blocking the birthing process. It was thought to be attempting to send a message to the human community, but the communication was unclear to Erna or her in-laws. The midwife then turned to the ritual expert of *Misalibi* who was, after all, the medium of an authoritative guardian spirit. This shaman, she assumed, could make the spirit state its purpose and make proper remedial action possible.

The situation was structured as befitted the occasion. *Ma Mekemi*, the suppliant, lavished praise on the powerful *gadu* she was about to consult and expressed her confidence in his powers. She also called upon the ancestors and other sacred powers to render support, referring to them by sacred and secret names. The medium responded in style. In trance, he offered his impressive credentials. Seated next to a flag dedicated to his guardian spirit, he invited the young woman's spirit to speak, but she only stammered some incomprehensible phrases. Rum and sacred white clay were sprinkled on her feet, but to little avail. She made an effort, called upon some ancestors, but then her mumblings petered out. When *Ma Mekemi* then admonished her, a story unfolded that moved many in the audience: "Her mother did not love her." Here *Mekemi* alluded to a denial of breast milk. Mother's love and mother's milk are powerful symbols that evoke strong emotions, and we observed some tears glittering in *Mekemi's* eyes.

The ritual expert remained unmoved, however, and told her "There is more to it than that." Erna started to swivel around on her low stool and to giggle, making it clear to all in attendance that she was now in trance. The healer was alerted visibly; tension rose, but he quietly

waited for the spirit's message. When it came, the possessing spirit, a bakuu, as was clear to all those present, first boasted about the many people it had killed: a Captain of her native village, another adult male, a young woman in Paramaribo, and one in the Netherlands. Now the bakuu had set eyes upon the beautiful black child of "that girl here" (the bakuu was referring to Erna, its medium), whom it was on the point of devouring. Most of those present were startled visibly and made loud exclamations. Ma Mekemi leaned back in horror.

The therapist urged Ma Mekemi to start interrogating the spirit; its name should be known. After some pressure, the bakuu deigned to divulge it: her name was "Jeanette." But she did not "work" on her own; she was in league with another bakuu, named Ro, and that one was even worse, really evil. Ro was after another relative, a young man, and it was generally known that he disliked Erna. But the demon Jeanette concentrated on the beautiful black child. Did they want to hear more? Additional information could be supplied. Jeanette was truly challenging the company, the therapist in particular.

The medium Erna had averted her face, she did not want to look the ritual expert in the eye, she said. This gave the ethnographers, seated near the door, an opportunity to watch her. She sat erect, talked disdainfully over her left shoulder, like urban Creole women do when demonstrating undisguised contempt for "bush people." Her mouth was twisted, she watched the company surreptitiously, she spoke Sranan-tongo, the Creole of Paramaribo. It was plain to all that Erna had studied city manners and taught herself the Creole of city people. For the time being, this would be her last chance to flaunt the demon's arrogant attitudes. "*Mi lasi kaba*" (I have already lost!), the demon stated.

But the interrogation continued. "Ask her who sent the demon?" the healer prompted Ma Mekemi. This was disclosed: the name of some unreliable Creole character in Paramaribo was mentioned as the sender. Mekemi, the midwife, was rather put off by what she had learned about the causes of Erna's strange behavior. The demon was sent away without the honorific libation of rum that a real guardian spirit is entitled to. "Did any of you ever see me offering a libation to a bakuu?" the therapist asked rhetorically. He settled back into his corner, quite at ease, eyes twinkling. He was obviously in his element now. "I knew right away what was wrong" he chuckled: "Did you ever see an ancestor spirit that laughs?" He answered himself: "Of course not, an ancestor weeps!" It was up to him to make the next move. The demon should be expelled, his verdict was. And he outlined with gusto how the exorcism was to be performed. But all of this should wait until after the delivery, and after the ritual that marks the end of the confinement period.

A week later, news reached us that Erna had given birth to a son. Whether she ever submitted to the exorcism rite we did not discover,

and whether it would have produced any result is open to doubt. The chances for success were slight. Fearful of being thrown back into a life in the backwoods, fully aware of how city people look down upon the rustic Ndyuka—and secretly sharing those views—many demon-ridden young women, likely candidates for exorcism, make a timely escape to the Coast. Were it not for difficulties with her pregnancy, Erna would have managed to evade the whole ritual. But Mekemi, the midwife and mother-in-law, had decided to seize this momentary crisis to try to restore a balance of power in the lineage and to instill some respect for traditional mores in a defiant young relative.

ANOTHER THERAPEUTIC CENTER

18 Da Pascal Kondée (The Village of Father Pascal), another new religious center, which is situated close to Gaansanti on the Lawa, dates from an earlier period of migration when Ndyuka from the Tapanahoni heartland needed more space for their subsistence gardens. Its founders, too, had been important personages in the communities they left, and its inhabitants still maintained close relations with their villages of origin. When we visited the place in 1989, the village elder who acted as its headman voiced his despair about the current situation. As a medium of an important ancestor from the *lonten*, “the time of running away,” he spoke in trance about how the ancestors had been betrayed, and how the whole venture of a new, independent, free, and proud society was in peril. In 1991, when we returned there, the old man was no longer alive, but his Yooka had taken possession of his daughter. She was the spiritual head of the settlement and attracted clients from neighboring communities and even from the Downstream Tapanahoni area. To our amazement, she introduced herself as a bakuu medium as well. Apparently, in this place so determined to remain faithful to the beliefs of the ancestors and to defend humanity against evil forces, a bakuu had been accepted as a helper.

Defending the quality of social relations is another important goal of this second settlement. The community presents the usual population mix of a typical upstream Ndyuka village; the elderly and the young are well represented. A son of the founder, disabled but mentally alert, is its *de facto* headman. Since he is not a medium of any deity he cannot be the spiritual leader of the camp, but with two of his sisters he forms the interpretation committee for its carry oracle. Ma Atuku, the third and youngest sister, has inherited her father’s guardian spirit. Probably in her fifties, she is a medium for three spirits: her father’s ghost, another ancestor spirit, and a demon. She is the first bakuu medium we have met who is not a rebel but a responsible and active citizen, a pillar of society. Together these four persons serve as staff for an oracle called Gwangwella, one of the more esoteric names

of Gaan Tata. As of this writing, we have not been able to trace any connection between this makeshift religious center and the old Gaan Tata oracles of Diitabiki (today still inoperative) and Gaanboli (which has resumed work on a modest scale)

Pascal Kondée's inhabitants realize that they are poor by material standards, certainly when compared with the standard of living in surrounding French Guiana, but they are proud to carry on a tradition of Maroon respectability and civility. Cases presented to the staff often concern problems with demons. Tackling these is no easier here than in Misalibi: bakuu are notoriously recalcitrant and averse to ritual treatment. Often, cases have to be discontinued, to be taken up again when the afflicted kin group redoubles its efforts to get a hearing. Such is the case here. The oracle staff, anticipating stubborn resistance, deviously postpones taking action. All types of excuses are made; staff members plead acute discomforts, carriers of the sacred bundle cannot be recruited, and only after copious entreaties will the priest-committee allow consultation of the deity. The clients have to do all they can to mollify the specialists by praising the god's worth and power.

The storyline is familiar. A kin group in the downstream Tapanahoni area has been saddled with a demon that wrought havoc in two lineage segments, two women are mentioned as afflicted, but only one, an elderly lady who complains much about the trouble caused by the demon, turns herself in to be treated now. She claims not to have had a proper night's sleep for over a week, "the thing" harasses her so badly. It also molests the children. The demon allegedly had been bought by a deceased grandmother who had been found out as a witch. The old woman is reminded that a remedy, a bottle containing an herbal concoction, had been offered to her before by the deity, but that she had refused to take it. She confesses that she has little faith in it. She is then reminded of the ritual she has gone through before, "out there upstream," which suggests an earlier and failed attempt at exorcism. "The bush shook when they worked at it" the therapist observes and stresses that it is a hazardous enterprise to tackle the case at all. The kin group assents: "they are at wits' end."

After much pleading and maneuvering, a consultation of the deity follows. The local headman acts as the front bearer of the sacred bundle. The husband of the second, absent "victim" is invited to volunteer as the other carrier, and to endorse the outcome of divination in this way. Sa Atuku is the main interpreter of the bundle's movements. She is obviously in control of the situation: whenever the sacred bundle lurches forward, she holds it back with her right hand and the god complies. The public gallery is under a large tree, too far off to overhear what is discussed. The outcome is that the patient is again advised to accept the proffered remedy. It is solemnly placed in the center of the gathering. This bottle contains a potion that will annul

the lethal powers of a demon and that, if she takes it, will protect her and the family from further peril. Again the woman declines and leaves in a huff. The others, about to depart, do not show much of a reaction. For the time being, the priests have washed their hands of the matter. The kin group will have to deal with its own problem.

We would like to have known how the demon was transformed into a divine instrument, but our stay was too short to discuss the matter properly. To raise such questions directly is highly unconventional, and Sa Atuku, a charming person and an excellent hostess, tactfully changed the subject when we tried to touch upon the issue of her complex mediumship. Our impression is that her purpose was twofold. On the one hand, by incorporating a demon in her ritual she showed solidarity with other women who resented the injustices of contemporary life. On the other, she must have realized that demons are here to stay, but that bakuu possession leads women nowhere and destroys the integrity of the social fabric. So the demons, like other spirits of the forest and the wild, have to adjust to social realities and, once purified, are taken up in the pantheon.

This case demonstrates that, in some circles at least, alternatives to exorcism have been accepted during these last decades. Here we see Sa Atuku, a person of high standing in her community, bridling the bakuu instead of exorcizing it. When Gaan Tata or Ogii ruled the land, such compromises would never have been accepted. This is another example of the ongoing evolution of Ndyuka spirituality in response to new economic and political realities beyond the boundaries of the tribe.

Notes

¹ Pakosie told us that his search for witches was limited to five villages.

² Ndyuka looked upon this complex of ideas as a "canon," a set of notions accepted by ruling groups as an unquestionable given, as axiomatic and binding. Though this does not imply that all Ndyuka accepted these ideas wholeheartedly, it does mean that anyone who challenges a canon will meet with formidable opposition.

³ In the Suriname Creole variety of folk belief, the terms bakuu and Ampuku are often used interchangeably, but among Ndyuka this is not the case.

⁴ Source: Da Akuden, Diitabiki village.

⁵ Obeyesekere's neologism (1990:237) expresses that such beliefs are crafted as stories with plots and fixed characters.

⁶ People said: "*en ati koo*" or, her heart is cool. "Cool" stands for the opposite of fiery and warm, which is a state that brings misfortune and sickness.

The Jungle Commando's Obiya

As discussed above, the flourishing of the occult does not keep Ndyuka or other Maroons from opposing their enemies with realistic means. In 1921, the Ndyuka and other Maroons organized the greatest strike in the history of the Dutch colony (Thoden van Velzen 2003). Much later, Suriname gained independence from the Netherlands in 1975. In 1980, Desi Bouterse, then a sergeant in the army of the newly independent republic, toppled a civilian government with the help of fifteen other NCOs (noncommissioned officers). In 1982, he effectively stifled opposition to his rule by allegedly ordering the torture and execution of a number of prominent Surinamese civilians—university professors, lawyers, and leading figures from the media and the trade unions.

Armed resistance to Bouterse's military regime began as early as 1984. It did not come from the mass of unemployed in Paramaribo or from the rural poor, but from ex-bodyguards and certain members of the military police and intelligence services—in short, from men who had occupied positions in the elite's periphery and who had to some extent profited from the military establishment, but who, although not on intimate or even personal terms with the leaders of the junta, were fully cognizant of the lavish, extravagant lifestyle of the army's top brass. They constituted a group of marginal individuals uncertain of their position. And most of them had Maroon backgrounds.

In 1985 and early 1986, a small group of young Ndyuka Maroons led by Ronnie Brunswijk, a former bodyguard of Bouterse, seized government property, raided a bank, and looted army trucks on their way back from French Guiana with luxury goods for the military and civilian elite. When efforts to arrest the “highway robbers” came to naught, the army stepped up its campaign with round-ups and collective reprisals against Ndyuka communities. It had not escaped the attention of the authorities that members of this gang disappeared into the Ndyuka population of the Cottica region, in the eastern part of Suriname’s coastal plain. The army reacted by setting up checkpoints on the road leading from Paramaribo through the Cottica area to Moengo, a mining town, and from there to Albina, a small coastal city (see fig. 25). Buses and cars were stopped and Ndyuka passengers traveling from Paramaribo to their homes were forced to strip to prove that they were not wearing bracelets or any other objects that could function as obiya. In the first months of 1986, some Ndyuka villages were surrounded by the army, and their inhabitants were removed to be penned up in convenient buildings for most of the day—while soldiers searched and looted their homes. Here and there, shrines and other sites of Maroon worship were desecrated, as if they represented a realistic military threat. But the army’s policy of collective reprisals against Maroon communities only succeeded in driving the young men of Ndyuka, Saamaka, and Pamaka to the guerrillas.

Guerrilla warfare began in earnest on 21 July 1986, when the Brunswijk group captured a small military post near Moengo by surprise. After a few more clashes with the National Army that ended favorably for the rebels, hundreds of volunteers, from various Maroon groups, swelled their ranks. The guerrillas called their little army the “Jungle Commando” and themselves “Jungles.” In November 1986, shortly after capturing Moengo, the Jungle Commando counted at least 1,500 members. This was their high tide.

From 1986 through the second half of 1989, while the military regime of Commander Desi Bouterse waged war on them, hundreds joined the Jungle Commando, the rebel army. During those years, they managed to protect their communities in the interior from the looting, devastation, and massacres that accompanied the actions of government troops against Maroon villagers in the coastal plain (cf. Amnesty 1987; Moiwana 1990).

After November 1986, military fortunes changed rapidly. The National Army ordered the civilian population to evacuate the Cottica region. After a special army unit murdered some forty civilians there—mostly children, women, and old people—the Ndyuka panicked and thousands fled to nearby French Guiana (Moiwana 1990). The National Army regained Moengo, forcing the guerrillas to withdraw into the hinterland. There they were protected by miles of almost

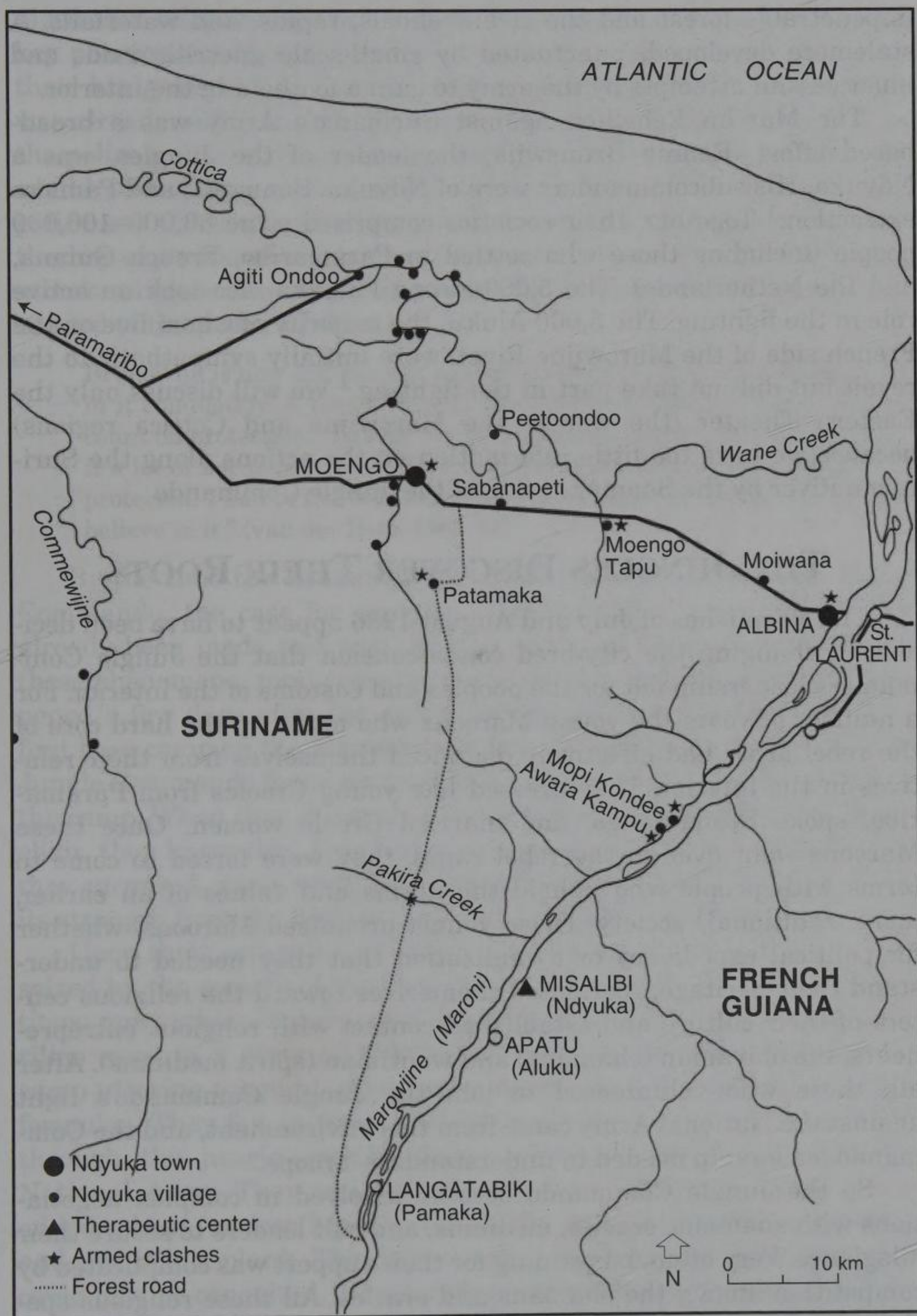


Figure 25 The eastern theater of the war, 1986–1992.

impenetrable forest and the rivers' shoals, rapids, and waterfalls. A stalemate developed, punctuated by small-scale guerrilla raids and unsuccessful attempts by the army to gain a foothold in the interior.

The Maroon Rebellion against Suriname's Army was a broad-based effort. Ronnie Brunswijk, the leader of the Jungles, was a Ndyuka. His subcommanders were of Ndyuka, Saamaka, and Pamaka extraction.¹ Together, their societies comprised some 80,000–100,000 people (including those who settled in Paramaribo, French Guiana, and the Netherlands). The 5,000-strong Pamaka also took an active role in the fighting. The 5,000 Aluku, the majority of whom live on the French side of the Marowijne River, were initially sympathetic to the revolt but did not take part in the fighting.² We will discuss only the Eastern Theater (the war in the Marowijne and Cottica regions) because we have too little information on the actions along the Suriname River by the Saamaka wing of the Jungle Commando.

THE JUNGLES DISCOVER THEIR ROOTS

The skirmishes of July and August 1986 appear to have been decisive in changing the city-bred condescension that the Jungle Commando's leadership felt for the peoples and customs of the interior. For a number of years the young Maroons who made up the hard core of the rebel army had effectively distanced themselves from their relatives in the interior. They dressed like young Creoles from Paramaribo, spoke Sranantongo, and married Creole women. Once these Maroons went over to the rebel camp, they were forced to come to terms with people who upheld the norms and values of an earlier, more traditional³ society. These young, urbanized Maroons, whether for political expediency or a realization that they needed to understand their heritage, reoriented themselves toward the religious centers of their culture and established contact with religious entrepreneurs, the obiyaman (shamans) and wentiman (spirit mediums). After all, those who volunteered to join the Jungle Commando's fight against the National Army came from this environment, and the Commando leadership needed to understand its "troops."

So the Jungle Commando became involved in complex negotiations with shamans, oracles, mediums, and cult leaders to secure their allegiance. Very often, bargaining for their support was complicated by competition among the shamans and oracles. All these religious specialists were busily interpreting and manipulating traditional ideas, trying to create a *modus vivendi* between the champions of Maroon culture in the hinterland and a younger generation oriented toward an urban milieu.

Still, strategic considerations seem to have been even more important in changing the Commando leadership's perspective. They recog-

nized that religious specialists such as shamans and mediums occupy key positions in Maroon society and are often the informal leaders of their kin groups. The Jungles' reorientation toward these specialists was already under way by 1985; for if the Ndyuka who were sought by the police had to go into hiding, especially if they were wounded, they would seek refuge with trusted shamans. Men on the run from the police and the army, like Brunswijk himself in 1985 and early 1986, thereby experienced much more intimate contact with the older generation's religion. Brunswijk once related how he gradually became persuaded of the power of obiya.

Brunswijk is now 100 percent in support of his culture. He believes in it completely. A person who is not fully convinced by it cannot count on protection. "I never used to," he says. "Formerly I thought it a lot of hocus-pocus. Until I experienced that I was really being protected. I had to feel it a couple of times before I really started to believe in it." (van der Beek 1987:84)

By the time the Brunswijk gang was transformed into the Jungle Commando, the case for accepting "traditional Maroon culture" had already been made and won. All the same, as happens so often with these phenomena, total conversion was sudden and unexpected. It happened a few days after the guerrillas had pitched their tents at their first base camp on the Marowijne in August 1986. Two members of the Jungle Commando found an ancient ceramic bottle⁴ in the forest behind the camp. When they discovered that the bottle contained an unknown elixir, they knew that Fate had placed a weapon in their hands. This, they surmised, was a sweli, an obiya of the most powerful type, deriving its strength from the highest supernatural forces of the universe.

Upon their return to the camp, the two Jungles fell into a trance, seized by the powers of the new obiya. The trance proved to be infectious; most other Jungles were immediately captured by it. The guerrillas were in a state of spiritual ecstasy. Some walked around the camp uttering tongues; others sang sacred hymns or shouted esoteric formulas. They felt in touch with divine forces that would lead them through the jungle and in their dangerous encounters with the National Army. They wrapped the precious pottery bottle in cloths, added a *buui* (an iron bracelet ordinarily used as a protective device), and tied it to a plank. The deity residing in this makeshift tabernacle could now be consulted. Two Jungles carried the plank with the cloth-draped bottle through the camp, as they would have done with any other carry oracle. Others posed questions to the new oracle. The deity answered by directing the movements of the bearers. In most cases it was not hard to interpret the movements. As with corpse divination, a step forward meant affirmative, shaking sideways a negative. Wild gyrations betrayed the deity's excitement or rage.⁵ Two months later a

journalist was eyewitness to the consultation of this oracle, which took place in Brunswijk's base camp:

Religious life starts up as dusk is falling. . . . It is a matter of gaining the support of the spirits for the approaching attack. Two men carry a plank on their head through the camp. It supports the obiya, a bundle put together by an obiyaman (medicine man) and sprinkled with beer. All the men follow the pair [carrying the plank] to an open space in the forest. By torchlight they assemble around the two bearers of the plank, who move their head and the plank in answer to questions from Brunswijk and the obiyaman. The plank indicated who may take part in the attack. One of the first to be selected is Kenny, a mercenary. Then follow most of the rest, delighted at being chosen, which makes them invulnerable in the coming battle. This ritual lasts for two hours. (de Lange 1986)

A participant to one of those sessions, fully convinced of the integrity of the proceedings, nonetheless noted that Ronnie Brunswijk occasionally suggested to the oracle's bearers who should be taken on the expedition and who should be left in the camp.⁶ For example, he whispered that they should not pick Olson, a Creole man from the city who had been kidnapped by the Jungles when they captured his Cessna plane. He could walk freely around their camp and often witnessed their religious ceremonies, but Olson had no wish to join the guerrillas, and Brunswijk did not want him. Brunswijk's occasional interferences were not seen by Ndyuka as proof of fraud. Like Saka trying out his new obiya (see chapter 6), some expert advice to the oracle is believed to be quite acceptable.

WHAT TYPE OF OBIYA?

The Jungles were fully convinced that the bottle found in the wilderness was something of immense value that had fallen into their hands. But what exactly was it? Its powers were not in dispute, but its identity had still to be established. From the beginning, they suspected that they had hit upon a sweli, an obiya that would protect them against evil forces if they, the Jungles, would keep a covenant with it. Not every condition pertaining to this covenant was immediately apparent, but it must have been clear to the obiya's finders from the very first day that they were to refrain from witchcraft and similar behavior. In return, the obiya would protect them from witches, and give them the strength allotted to all those who live life as decent human beings. Soon, however, alternate interpretations gained acceptance.

Bodoo, a Pamaka obiyaman, persuasively defined their new obiya as a special type of Kumanti, one well suited for healing and war. During the weeks when his vision prevailed, he succeeded in convincing the Jungles that this Kumanti medicine would lead them directly to a

stock of obiya that had been used by the eighteenth-century guerilla chief Boni (Hoogbergen 1990) and that still lay hidden in an ancient jungle fortress. The Jungle Commando mounted an expedition to an island in the Marowijne River where Boni had long withstood the onslaught of the colonial army sent to capture him and his followers. And there indeed, they recovered a cache of weapons dating from the time Boni and his band of guerrillas lived in the river fortress (roughly at the end of the 1780s).

For a few months in 1986 a more gruesome innovation dominated religious life in the guerrilla camps. It was promoted by two sons of Wensi's former deputy Andauna. They insisted that the obiya discovered in the forest had been Wensi's favorite one that he, shortly before his death, had hidden in that remote place. Andauna's sons argued that this was a brand new sort of obiya, unencumbered by taboos that once may have had some function but had lost its value in modern times. For a couple of weeks this line of thinking held sway over religious life in the main guerrilla camp. Karl Penta, a white British mercenary working for the Jungle Commando, observed the following phenomena in the fall of 1986:

As we stood in the queue [in a food line], an awful, gagging stench filled the air. Round the back of the cookhouse there was a voodoo shrine and on a little post sticking into the ground was a badly decomposed human head wearing a tin helmet. It stank and was swarming with flies. I lost my rag,⁷ ran over, kicked the head off the post to get rid of the flies, and picked it up by the chinstrap. This was somebody's son, someone's husband. I shouldn't even have kicked it. He had to be buried. I took the severed head to Radjin [a Jungle of Hindustani extraction]. "What the fuck's this?" I demanded. "Oh, I can't stop these guys. They do the voodoo all the time." (2002:124)

And a colleague of Penta—by the name of Keith—alerted Penta to the following:

The voodoo man splashed all fifty of them who were there, Keith included, with water from a bucket near the shrine. The next morning Keith went out to look at the shrine and came back with a face like thunder. He'd just seen what was in the bucket—a couple of inches of water and the severed head of an enemy soldier. Nearby, he found a forty-five-gallon drum three-quarters full of water with the hearts, hands, feet, and heads of enemy soldiers floating in it. Every time the commandos shot one of Bouterse's men, they butchered parts of his body and threw them in the drum. The voodoo man would then pick out the severed body parts and organs he needed for a particular ceremony. These people believed that you can actually take on the qualities of one of your victims. (2002:43)

When we first read this account, we believed this to be a product of the heated imagination of a mercenary under great stress. The word "voodoo," for example, betrays a lack of familiarity with Maroon religious beliefs. But our investigation gave us a different perspective. For a couple of weeks in 1986, this "savage" behavior had indeed taken place in the main guerrilla camp. The obiyaman who supervised this ritual was a Pamaka Maroon called Thoma. He had made a name for himself by chopping down several sacred silk-cotton trees along the Marowijne River, as Wensi once had done in the 1930s in other areas. Thoma believed it his mission to break through the crust of traditional medicine and present new possibilities, a modern way of using the obiya. More important than the misgivings of the mercenaries was the guerrillas' own revulsion against these practices. Some Jungles were so concerned about this perversion of religious principles that they solicited the advice of an obiyaman whom they considered to be more responsible.⁸

Under pressure of criticism from various sides, the leaders of the Jungle Commando decided a few weeks later they could no longer afford religious specialists such as the "wild axe man," as the mercenaries had dubbed Thoma. He was sent away, deep into the interior, to collect tribute from gold miners.

CHAMPIONS OF TRADITION

In the years preceding resistance to Bouterse's regime, some prominent Ndyuka shamans had benefited from transactions with Paramaribo's military or civilian elites. Sometimes it was a consultation for a member of the military junta; on other occasions ministers of the puppet government or high-ranking officials requested advice. Religious specialists are, after all, businessmen seeking an income. But these professional transactions with Bakaa should not lead us to underestimate the conservative force that shamans represent in Maroon life. From the beginning of their campaign, the rebel army's leadership had attempted to enlist the support of as many religious specialists as possible. "Who is not for us is against us," seems to have been the motto, and all obiyaman's relations with the military regime were carefully checked by the Commando leadership. Any shaman who did not close his practice and return to the interior was automatically suspected of treason. As of early 1986, scores of obiyaman began working for the Jungle Commando, most of them for individuals. Through the work of Bilby, the foremost Aluku ethnographer, it has become clear that at least one prominent Aluku shaman worked for the Jungle Commando.

I was told of one Aluku obiyaman in particular, from the village of Motende, who made an especially valuable contribution to the

Jungle Commando's fight. Not only did this man perform protective rituals for those who risked the bullets of the government forces, but he himself, I was told, courageously participated in these battles. (He was one of a handful of Aluku individuals who took part directly in the conflict.) Confident of the efficacy of his *obia*, he would stride out into the crossfire, collecting weapons and ammunition from the bodies of the enemy dead and thrusting them into a large sack hanging from his shoulder. (Bilby 1990:512)

In a small village on the Tapanahoni River with little more than two hundred inhabitants, we learned of one shaman who trained at least six young men in Kumanti lore. People who train to become a medium for spirits of this pantheon are taught the sacred traditions of the cult and the practical business of how to dress wounds, how to overcome fear, and even how to ensure invulnerability to bullets. It seems unlikely that a young Ndyuka, or any Maroon for that matter, could become an acolyte of Kumanti without at the same time being indoctrinated into other aspects of traditional lore. This small village with its six young Jungles was no exception.

In 1987, on a trip along the Marowijne and Tapanahoni rivers, we were made aware that the services of Kumanti priests were much sought after. Before their shrines, under makeshift awnings, we noticed dozens of bundles of paraphernalia. Our travel companions explained that these belonged to Jungles who were expected to leave them there with the shamans as long as they did not need them for combat. The power of these sashes, cords, and other sacred items could be severely diminished if they were inadvertently brought in contact with menstruating women or new mothers in postnatal confinement. Again, it seems improbable that young men following Kumanti training could avoid exposure to Ndyuka lore in a broader sense.

OBIYAMAN UNDER A CLOUD

Obiyaman, like academics, are a highly competitive bunch of specialists. Relations among themselves and with their clients can be understood as a marketplace where expertise is bought and sold, and where customers and suppliers jockey for position. The Jungle Commando was paying and cajoling obiyaman to be loyal to its cause. So was the military: it was said of Bouterse, who was both the military commander and, at that time, the head of state, that "he doesn't make a move without first consulting with his favorite shaman."

Suspicion was rife among the shamans drafted into the rebel cause. Vicious backbiting to ruin the reputation of rivals was not unusual. In 1986, five obiyaman, including Thoma, entered the permanent employ of the Jungle Commando. Others regularly offered their services to the Commando as a whole or to individual Jungles.

Some, however, remained under a cloud. The following three examples are of obiyaman who were viewed with some degree of suspicion from the beginning of the civil war.

The Case of Dewini

¹⁸⁹ Dewini (see chapter 13), a Ndyuka, enjoyed the reputation of being an extraordinary shaman. During the 1960s, he established himself as medium of a new type of powerful spirit. This Seiwenti (spirit of support; Gaan Tata's ancillary spirit) demanded a profound reform of Ndyuka religious institutions. At the end of the 1960s, when Dewini brought his spiritual demands before the priests of Gaan Tata at Diitabiki, he was met only with hostility and suspicion. Even before 1970, antagonism toward his spiritual claims had grown so overt that he decided to transfer his medico-religious practice to the Coast, a move that may have been made more attractive by the presence in and around Paramaribo of hundreds of wage-earning Ndyuka migrants. Dewini was highly successful; patients flocked to his shrine for treatment. His clientele did not remain restricted to Ndyuka but included Creoles and even some Hindustani. A shrewd businessman, Dewini bought parcels of land, hired labor, and began large-scale cultivation of manioc for the Paramaribo market. Part of his income was reinvested in real estate. During the opening months of the civil war his prosperity became a topic of discussion among the Ndyuka. Migrants spread the rumor that Dewini supplied Bouterse and other members of his junta with obiya, but no evidence for this support of the military was ever presented.

Soon after the civil war began, representatives of the Jungle Commando journeyed secretly to Paramaribo to urge Dewini to wrap up his business, leave the city, and join the rebellion. They told him that his reputation would be jeopardized if he remained near Paramaribo. When Brunswijk's envoys returned empty-handed, this confirmed the suspicion of Dewini's enemies and business rivals that he had sold out to the military. In March 1987, an Aluku shaman in St. Laurent (French Guiana), then a safe haven for the guerrillas, pronounced a public curse on Dewini.

The Case of Sawini

Similar rumors circulated about other shamans. One of these, a Ndyuka obiyaman of considerable stature had, like Dewini, settled in Paramaribo. A delegation from the guerrillas managed to pass the military posts and enter the capital undetected in an attempt to win Sawini for their cause. Sawini's response was different from Dewini's. In August 1986, he left the capital to offer his services at rebel headquarters. He was welcomed and invited to join Brunswijk's religious

staff. Sawini brought a gift: a sacred machete, ritually prepared by the obiyaman himself and wrapped in a cloth. Early in September 1986, Sawini took part in one of the first guerrilla raids of the war, an attack on the coastal town of Albina. He was seriously wounded and transported to a colleague's obiya osu (the shrine where the obiya are stored and where all ritual work is performed). Soon thereafter Sawini died. A team of shamans associated with the rebels investigated this sudden death by using the new carry oracle. They divined that Sawini had sworn a secret oath with Commander Bouterse to help destroy the rebel Maroons. The sacred machete contained no useful obiya, these shamans asserted, but only evil ingredients meant to damage the guerrillas' cause. Although leading guerrillas rejected this divination, Sawini nevertheless did not receive the prefix *Zalig* (Blessed) before his name as did, for example, his comrades-in-arms, Dyango, Baka Gadu, and Nel Aboikoni, who died in the first months of the war. They were called *Zalig Dyango*, *Zalig Baka Gadu*, and *Zalig Nel*. Adding the prefix *Zalig* to a person's name resembles the deceased's classification by the Gaan Tata priests into "Yooka dede" and "gadu dede." Instead of posthumously honoring a deceased Ndyuka as a "Yooka dede" they would now name the deceased "Zalig."

The Case of André Pakosie

During the late 1970s and 1980 André Pakosie's talents as an oral historian, orator, and, above all, obiyaman and herbalist were widely recognized among the Ndyuka of the Tapanahoni and Cottica regions as well as in the wider Suriname society. In 1980, Pakosie founded *Sabanapeti*, a small but influential medico-religious center. *Sabanapeti* was well situated on the Albina-Paramaribo road—easy to reach by car from the capital and Albina—while its isolated location guaranteed its patients privacy (see fig. 25). His clientele included not only Maroons but also patients from most of Suriname's other ethnic groups, from neighboring countries, and from the Caribbean. From March to July 1985, some 2,000 patients and other clients traveled to *Sabanapeti* for treatment or advice. In the weeks between late August and early October 1985, another 500 patients received treatment. Pakosie's work as a witch hunter was significant for his reputation among his fellow Ndyuka. In 1979, after symbolically demonstrating his religious kinship with Akule by entering Agiti Ondoo—the main Ndyuka village of the Cottica region—along the same path that his illustrious predecessor had once trodden, Pakosie's credentials as a religious leader in the Ogii tradition were established. Starting in Akoloi Kondee, he worked in almost all Ndyuka villages and settlements as a healer. In 1979, he urged people in five villages to bring him their weapons of witchcraft so that he and his assistants could destroy them. Pakosie's name was firmly established as the foremost

religious leader among the Cottica Ndyuka. Back in 1974, in recognition of his advocacy of Afro-Surinamese culture, he was given a post as civil servant in the Ministry for Cultural Affairs, and in the early 1980s, Pakosie was a man of consequence in the national arena, his counsel sought by such dignitaries as Rick Aron, the Chairman of the "Nationale Assemblée" (Suriname's National Assembly).

When the Jungles set up one of their camps close to Sabanapeti, Pakosie evacuated his people to Peetoondoo, a nearby Ndyuka village, for reasons of safety. Soon thereafter he received a message from leaders of the Jungle Commando to report at their headquarters. If he did not come voluntarily, a detachment of thirty Jungles would come to pick him up at Peetoondoo. Pakosie did not wait for this escort. He went to Brunswijk's place on his own accord and was received with cordiality by the leader of the Jungle Commando. Brunswijk requested Pakosie's assistance in the forthcoming battle of Moengo. Although Pakosie was mourning the death of his wife and felt he could not mobilize his spiritual assets fully, he promised help. Pakosie invited the Jungle Commando's shamans to be present while he and his assistants constructed an obiya that could be used in the struggle ahead. One day after its completion, the guerrillas captured Moengo.

A few weeks later, at the end of November 1986, Moengo came under fire from tanks and patrol boats, and special units infiltrated behind the guerrilla lines. The rebel army abandoned its positions around Moengo and withdrew into the interior. Pakosie joined thousands of other Maroons, fleeing to safety across the border into French Guiana where camps for the refugees were opened at St. Laurent. Some people in the rebel camp began blaming Pakosie for the fall of Moengo. One of his colleagues, who had been present when Pakosie's team fabricated the obiya, began to cast doubt on that undertaking. Pakosie had purposely weakened their obiya, he claimed; had it not been for his betrayal they would still be in control of Moengo. Pakosie pointed out that it was the Jungle Commando's failure to build a proper defensive perimeter around Moengo that caused them to lose the mining town. From French Guiana, Pakosie requested and received asylum in the Netherlands in 1987 (van Westerloo 1987). In 2002 André Pakosie was inaugurated by Gaanman Gazon (1966–present) as a Kabiten for all the Ndyuka living in the Netherlands.

SHOPPING FOR OBIYA

During the first months of the uprising the Jungle Commando relied heavily on the contacts that Ronnie Brunswijk's small band of highway robbers had established in 1985 and 1986 with shamans of the Cottica region, many of whom had been trained in the Amanfu tradition by Wensi or by his deputy Andauna. At least one of those obiyaman was

arrested by the military when the uprising started in July 1986. Thoma, who lived in a forest camp in Pamaka territory, did not need to fear detainment, because at that time the military operated along the main East-West road—the Albina–Moengo–Paramaribo coastal highway.

It was Thoma who reformulated the Amanfu gospel. (We were able to reconstruct the contours of this religious tradition from various sources.) There is little to support his claim that Amanfu was an ancient obiya, going back to the days of slavery.⁹ Perhaps the gruesome ritual that shocked the mercenaries (the skulls, the body parts), and that resembled practices Stedman (1988/1790:407) had reported in 1775 among both the Aluku insurgents and their enemies, the Black Rangers, may evidence a historic foundation for Amanfu lore. But in other ways, the Amanfu tradition was radically opposed to almost all aspects of Ndyuka religion. Thoma had been cutting down the sacred kankantii trees in Pamaka territory before the war began. Quite surprisingly, some of Thoma's colleagues insisted that Amanfu was not an ancient tradition but the only modern religious cult of the Maroons. The critical proof was that Amanfu obiya had no *kina*, no religious taboos to observe when using the obiya.¹⁰ Even the taboo on contacts with women during menstruation was lifted by Wensi's followers. n.b.
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not

As previously mentioned, relatively early in the war Thoma was sent packing. Penta's (2002) account suggests that, in the eyes of the guerrilla leaders, Thoma had become a public relations liability. There may have been a more fundamental reason for his dismissal from the religious staff, namely the collective opposition of other shamans to the Amanfu tradition. A return to more traditional religious practices certainly became evident when Boodoo, the Pamaka shaman, led an expedition of Jungles to Bonidoro in the Marowijne River, an island that appears in Hoogbergen's history of the Boni wars (1990:146–148) as the place where the Dutch negotiated with the Aluku leaders (Boni being foremost among them) in the early 1790s. In Ndyuka history the island is a veritable obiya cache. Because the Aluku are famed for their knowledge of Kumanti obiya, Boodoo traveled there to dig up Boni's coveted war obiya.

Today the Aluku Maroons live along the Lawa River, a tributary of the Marowijne. Most Aluku villages are in French territory, and they consider themselves French subjects and are seen as such by the authorities. The Aluku did not take part in the fighting in Suriname. As one Jungle explained to us: "Why should they risk their lives for us? They know they are protected by the French army." But in the early years of the revolt, the Aluku sympathized with the rebels and on various occasions helped the Jungle Commando with transport and military intelligence.

News of the Jungle Commando's visit to Bonidoro island reached the Aluku. In January 1987, a messenger from the Tata Odun oracle,

the chief Aluku oracle, arrived at Brunswijk's headquarters. The guerrillas were told that the deity Odun was amazed that the Jungles were visiting his sacred places without asking him for permission. But Odun took pity on the Jungles who were fighting an unequal war. He was willing to help them with obiya that could turn the tables. They should come to his oracle, show proper respect, and then he would help them.

The guerrillas eagerly grasped the opportunity. A delegation of prominent Jungles journeyed to the Aluku Gaanman to beg him for a ritual treatment. But the Aluku Gaanman refused to help them consult Tata Odun. (A possible explanation could be the Aluku's dismay at learning that the Jungles had been digging up *feti obiya* [war obiya] in one of the Aluku's most sacred places, and without their permission.) Shortly after this refusal, however, the Jungles found an Aluku shaman, at Kotika village on the Lawa, who was willing to provide them with Kumanti obiya. The rituals lasted several days. This Commando unit left for Victoria—on the Suriname River—to fight an army that was backed up by gunboats. That engagement proved disastrous for the Jungles. Only with great difficulty and substantial losses could the guerrillas extricate themselves from the trap that the army had sprung on them.

After regaining their strength, this group of Jungles mounted an attack on a military post near the Suriname River, in the central part of the country. That battle, too, turned into a disaster. Five Jungles died in the engagement, three of them belonging to the hard core of the guerrilla army.¹¹ This was 17 February 1987, one of the few dates remembered by members of the Jungle Commando (van der Beek 1987:75). Afterwards explanations began to circulate, some of them based on consultation with their own carry oracle. After receiving their ritual treatment at the hands of the Aluku shaman, it was said, they should have left immediately for the front. Instead they hung around with women, some of them in their menstrual period. Others took a more practical view of the events: "Why didn't they conduct a proper reconnaissance of the area instead of just walking into an open field, standing on one foot with a leaf in their mouth, showing off their so-called invulnerability? The army had a field day, just mowing them down."¹² Others insisted that the Jungles, while running away, had turned their backs toward the soldiers, "something a man treated with Kumanti obiya should never have done." But there were also misgivings about the Aluku; the consulted shaman could have given them "*takuu obiya*" (bad obiya), another way of saying that they had been bewitched, sent to their deaths with faulty medicines.¹³ What all these interpretations demonstrate is that the days of experimenting with "modern obiya" were over. From then on Jungles would have to procure the regular obiya and faithfully respect the prohibitions that go with their use.

BEGGING GAAN TATA

Religious cults provide an important organizational framework for Maroon societies. Suriname's civil war demonstrated that this organizational framework not only operates in peacetime, but it may even play a decisive role in uniting and motivating resistance fighters against the enemy. As mentioned previously, among Ndyuka three supernatural agencies are of the highest rank and greatest political importance: Gaan Tata (Great Father), Agedeonsu (God of Solace and Fertility), and Ogii (Danger—deity of the wilderness). This trinity occupies the highest place in Ndyuka cosmology; it ranks above all spirits or gods.

Each deity has its own sanctuaries, rites, priests, and body of adherents that are dedicated to it and that comprise a cult. However, Ndyuka feel obliged to cooperate in the veneration of these gods; otherwise the rites can never meet with success. First, mutual differences must be cleared up and hostilities brought to an end. Ndyuka, and sometimes other Maroons as well, are regularly summoned to propitiate the gods collectively, and pilgrimages are undertaken to sacred and secret places in the forest. An Outsider traveling along one of the rivers of the interior may chance upon hundreds of Maroons on their way to a pilgrimage center,¹⁴ reminding the Outsider that he or she is confronting a society that still enjoys considerable cultural autonomy.

Ndyuka society can be seen as having a central "divinatory apparatus." Ndyuka ideology stresses the necessity of the gods—and the major oracles—to operate in agreement. Divine speech on matters affecting all Ndyuka is deemed authoritative only if it is uttered by the three leading gods in concert, thus giving rise to the sacred "tripod," as André Pakosie put it. In actual practice, relations among the oracles seem more like a competition rather than the harmonious cooperation that Ndyuka leaders long to see. After Brunswijk's fighters withdrew from the coastal plain into the interior, the relationship between leaders of the Jungle Commando and oracle priests became critical for recruiting and mobilizing Jungles.

Secret diplomacy between the Jungle Commando's leadership and the priests of the three main Ndyuka cults therefore commenced just after the beginning of the revolt. Early in September 1986, a delegation from the rebel forces visited Diitabiki, home of the Ndyuka Paramount Chief and the main shrines for the Gaan Tata cult. The deputation consisted of Brunswijk and most other Jungle Commando leaders, who sought an unambiguous verdict on the conflict by the divine. They hoped to hear from Gaan Tata that they were fighting a just war, something of grave concern to all Maroons and their gods. But no such verdict was forthcoming, for Brunswijk had walked into a political minefield.

At first the priests refused to carry the oracle for consultation. They said they could not do so until they had received a clear mandate from the gaan kuutu. They reminded their audience that in the recent past another gaan kuutu, at the instigation of Akalali, had concluded that Gaan Tata had lost its position as the oracle of "The Twelve." Thus, only members of the Otoo clan and perhaps a few supplicants could ask Gaan Tata for help.¹⁵ A national palaver to undo that decision would take weeks to organize as Ndyuka Captains from some thirty Tapanahoni villages needed to participate.

Another reason why there came no divine declaration of support for the rebel cause was the internal division among the Ndyuka. Military rule had started in 1980, and substantial pockets of followers of the regime had sprung up in Ndyuka territory. Aware of this decision, the priests' stratagem was to postpone the consultation, knowing quite well that with the civil war at its height, Brunswijk and his colleagues could not afford to stay away from the front for long. In the meantime, people could assess the military chances for the Commando.

There was yet a third reason why Gaan Tata's priests would not press for a gaan kuutu. After Akalali's position had started to erode around 1976, and again after his death in 1983, Gaan Tata's priests had cautiously attempted to resume the public worship of their deity but had met with strong opposition. Too many Ndyuka were now afraid that agreeing to the Jungles' request would give Gaan Tata's priests an opportunity to bring back the god's cargoes and the other extortions.

This was the situation facing Brunswijk when he appeared before Gaan Tata's oracle in 1986. He cannot have been ignorant of this religious turmoil. That his delegation made the attempt anyway is perhaps best explained by the Ndyuka's general enthusiasm for war that year. Passions were running high, and the National Army had suffered two humiliating setbacks during the final weeks of August.

Finally, after many hours of deliberation, Gaan Tata's priests yielded to popular pressure. The tabernacle of the deity was removed from its resting place in the shrine and "enticed to return briefly from early retirement," as it was expressed. After some polite exchanges that had to do with his long period of absence, the god expressed amazement that the Ndyuka people were interested in his opinion at all. For years no one had bothered to consult him. And now suddenly young men were soliciting his opinion on war in a remote place.¹⁶ Gaan Tata pointed out that he did not recall seeing any of these brave young fellows before. "Yes, he had seen smoke, and he had heard gun shots being fired, but surely the people who fired these shots and torched these buildings would know better than he what it was all about."¹⁷ "Why," the deity wondered, "did they first start something and *then* ask my advice? Why did they make no effort to get my view on the matter beforehand? Now it is too late to help; they have waited too long."

Here the deity was closely echoing the opinions of the Gaanman, who had on various occasions expressed his pique at not being asked for advice before Brunswijk and his companions lit the fuse. Later, the Chief had made it known that he intended to maintain his neutrality in this conflict. Disillusioned, the Jungle Commando's delegation prepared to leave the oracle. Then, the day before their departure, the priests offered them a measure of support by questioning the legitimacy of military rule. In fact, Gaan Tata presented the public with a summation of Ndyuka grievances against the military junta.

The deity pointed out that the mutinous sergeants had torched the police headquarters in Paramaribo (on 25 February 1980, the day of the coup), thus rendering any claim to their legitimacy dubious at best. Violence had been perpetrated against a civilian government that held a just claim to represent the voters. The second reason for the present fighting was that the blood of prominent civilians had been shed in Paramaribo in December 1982. Finally, Gaan Tata mentioned the mistreatment that river transporters in the Marowijne district received at the hands of soldiers and customs officers. He was particularly vehement in denouncing the constant checking and fining of these bagasiman, calling it an unacceptable violation of the Ndyuka's rights to move freely within their own territory—the rivers of Suriname's interior.

Still, no clear and direct authorization of the rebellion followed. That led to verbal abuse between priests and Jungles, whereupon one of Gaan Tata's elderly priests remarked: "When we forced Akalali out of our Tapanahoni villages, he stopped at the confluence of Tapanahoni and Marowijne and foretold this moment, saying: 'One day soon, young men with guns will return, and the Chief and all his followers will be humiliated. This will be their punishment for evicting me from my own village.'"¹⁸

THE FLYING SCHOOL

After the fracas at the Gaan Tata oracle in September 1986, the Commando's leadership opted for a more cautious approach to the "sacred tripod." In the future a special liaison unit would investigate the possibilities for mobilizing more obiyaman and influencing decision making at the tribal oracles. This group, under the leadership of "Commandant" Mikael, established good relations with the priests and custodians of the Agedeonsu eult. In July and August 1987, and in response to a plea for help from Mikael's group, communal rites for this deity were held at the sacred shrines of Kiyoo Kondée, to commemorate the ancestors who fought the war of independence against the Dutch colonial regime in the eighteenth century. Such rituals were usually held in national emergencies, for which war obviously quali-

fied. Although Agedeonsu's priests refrained from publicly endorsing the rebellion, they nevertheless supported it indirectly. Their message was that the fighting concerned all Maroons—Ndyuka, Saamaka, Pamaka—and could therefore no longer be ignored. Interesting also was the pressure put on those Ndyuka who continued to conduct business as if nothing had happened. A river transporter we knew, who had excused himself from the rites on grounds that the Europeans he was working for would not appreciate his absence for a couple of weeks, was later forced to pay a fine to Agedeonsu's priests. Declaring a state of emergency, pressuring people to attend, and then making them pray together to the gods and ancestors from the war of independence constituted a *de facto* backing of the rebels, no matter how indirect.

When support for the Jungle Commando began to dwindle during 1989, it was again Agedeonsu to whom the Jungles turned. Mikael pleaded with the deity: "Look, at the pitiful state we are in. Of the many hundreds who joined us a few years ago, only 37 are left. Supreme Lord, help us to get out of this situation." Agedeonsu acceded, but demanded that a great feast be held in his village and that his every prohibition would be scrupulously obeyed. Henceforth the Jungles should stop shooting at government troops and leave all the fighting to the white men (the mercenaries). The Jungles collected almost 10,000 French francs (about \$2,000) worth of goods to bring to Agedeonsu's feast. Elders from every Tapanahoni village joined in the rites. Soon thereafter, Bouterse was briefly arrested and mistreated by the Brazilian police in Sao Paulo; he was rumored to have had a tooth knocked out. This was popularly interpreted as a sign of Agedeonsu's intervention.¹⁹

The relationship between the Jungle Commando and the Ogii cult was complex. Akalali, while retaining his mediumship of Saantigoon Futuboi, had recognized Pakosie as Ogii's legitimate avatar on two separate occasions.²⁰ As noted earlier, the leaders of the Jungle Commando enlisted the support of Pakosie on the eve of the capture of Moengo town in October 1986. We surmise that for many guerrillas Pakosie was just another religious specialist who could be expected to produce weapons-grade obiya, but that his being the High Priest of the Ogii cult never entered their calculation. However, on a deeper level there was indeed a connection between the Jungle Commando and Ogii. The Captains and elders who spoke out in favor of the uprising, and the shamans who helped the Jungles by fashioning them obiya, were nearly all former followers of Akalali. The most prominent of the obiyaman in the later period of the rebellion was Alibonet, a man who had been Akalali's right hand. It was Alibonet who restored order in the fairly chaotic situation that had existed as the result of the Jungle Commando's mobilization of so many spiritual advisers. Amanfu's followers were discharged, and Kumanti shamans were recruited for the ritual preparation (*seeka*) of the guerrillas.²¹

Between the end of 1986 and the end of 1989, Commandant Mikael visited all Ndyuka villages to mobilize spiritual support. He played a considerable role in attracting Kumanti shamans to work for the Jungle Commando. In addition, he furthered new projects to help the Jungles win the war. His pet project, the "flying school," deserves to be discussed here. It was based on the assumption that the nefarious powers of the most accomplished witches, the *azeman* or "vampires," could be harnessed. What was needed, according to Mikael, was to separate their capacity to fly from their lust for the blood of their victims. He considered this vampire phenomenon to be a corruption, a later development. In all parts of Africa, some shamans as well as some common people had developed the capacity to fly. Then the Europeans came and brought salt. Eating salt undermined the ability to fly,²² but some Africans, who refused to eat salt, retained this knowledge. Unfortunately, certain shamans began abusing their powers. They knew they could enter other people's houses at all times, even during the night, and the temptation to do evil, to suck blood from their victims, was too strong for some of these people. It was they who gave the flying Africans a bad name. Nevertheless, the enslaved Africans who were brought to Suriname recalled the days when some of their shamans used this capacity for traveling over great distances but never abused their powers by harming others.

Mikael continued by relating to us how he had started to work on an alchemical program that focused on the separation of the capacity to fly from the urge to drink blood. He visited most villages to collect information on the *azeman*. The project came to a halt when his best informant, an old woman in the Godoolo villages, died and was pronounced to be a witch. Well-meaning people advised Mikael to stop this project as he himself faced the substantial risk of being considered a person eager to learn the trade of witchcraft. When soon after Sweli Gadu appeared in Mikael's dream to warn him not to pursue this investigation any longer, Mikael quit studying the *azeman*. But he regretted having to abandon this project. "Had we been able to recover this capacity," Mikael explained, "we could have sent a flying squadron to Bouterse's headquarters in Paramaribo, and kill him and his partners in crime. But even without such an attack we would have been more equal: Bouterse has his *obiya santa*²³ from Haiti, we would have had the purified *azeman obiya*."

A FURY IN THE NATIONAL ARMY

Until the military junta fomented this civil war, the Ndyuka had not engaged in combat since the *lonten*, the time of running away. The one exception was the Ndyuka joining forces with the Dutch in the war against the Aluku in the early 1790s, a brief but bloody encounter

greatly regretted by the Ndyuka only a few years later. But that happened two centuries ago. The Ndyuka and other Maroons faced a problem for which history had not prepared them: what would be the fate of people killed by Maroons in a war? Would such dead activate kunu?

Avenging spirits usually arise when Ndyuka inflict injustice on other Ndyuka.²⁴ In 1986 and 1987, scores of civilians were killed in action by the army of Suriname that counted dozens of Maroons among its soldiers. Can avenging spirits be expected to arise from such calamities? When asked about this matter, one of Gaan Tata's priests responded definitively: "Crimes engender furies, acts of war do not." But there is an instructive precedent: Ogii, in overshooting his aim, unleashed the Great War of the Europeans, and then the First World War's slain soldiers returned to Ndyuka as the avenging Sudati.

The strong conviction among Gaan Tata's priests—that no furies would result from this war—was itself an opinion formed in a political field, betraying the oracle's priests' desire not to get involved. But other Ndyuka hold different opinions. The Sudati example dates from the beginning of last century, but there is at least one recent demonstration that war may give rise to furies as well.

At the end of 1987, a strange affliction troubled Manii, a Ndyuka and a sergeant in the National Army. Manii fought in several battles against Maroon guerrillas. He was wounded, but even before his recuperation he announced, to the delight of his superiors, that he would soon take up arms against the "Brunswijk terrorists" again. But something went wrong. In November 1987, Manii's neighbors divined that he had been seized by a ghost. Observers concurred that it was a female spirit who spoke the Ndyuka language. The ghost shouted through the silent night of Paramaribo's middle-class quarter: "They killed me while I was pregnant!" Then followed, in appalling detail, the manner of her demise. It transpired that Manii was possessed by Feediika, a woman killed in the village of Moiwana, site of the notorious 1986 massacre of Ndyuka civilians by the National Army. Even after that tragic event, Manii remained an active member of the National Army, proud of his uncompromising attitude toward the rebels.

Many of the sergeant's relatives, including a couple of religious specialists from Manii's lineage who knew they would be needed to appease the ghost, fled to the interior, afraid other Ndyuka might associate them with this sordid crime. Due to the reluctance of Ndyuka religious specialists to "get involved," no shrine has ever been erected to the ghost of Feediika and her unborn child; nor did we hear of any cultic performances. The agonizing guilt of this sergeant may remain a personal tragedy without consequence for social relations within his own "belly" or between the lineages of Feediika and Manii.

It is unknown to us, and the Ndyuka we spoke to, whether the lineages of Feediika and Manii did indeed come together for kunu vener-

ation. Nor have we heard of other avenging spirits, generated by the civil war, that haunt Ndyuka lineages. Predictions about the future are difficult to make. But what we do know is that thousands of Ndyuka have left their traditional homeland of the Tapanahoni and Cottica to take up residence in Paramaribo, French Guiana, and the Netherlands. Can the traditional kunu mechanisms work when such geographical dispersal has become a fact of life? The arena for any avenging spirit is the matrilineage, a kin group whose members live today at different places and countries. Within the Netherlands, the bilateral kin group (*famii*) appears to grow more important. But such an unbounded network of relatives can never replace the lineage with its clear-cut boundaries. Our provisional answer is that kunu veneration, although it is unlikely to disappear in the near future, will get much weaker.

THE JUNGLE COMMANDO'S END

The erosion of the Jungle Commando began in 1987. The Jungles had been pushed back into the interior from where they could only occasionally muster a credible threat to Suriname's vital arteries, the coastal roads. The guerrillas received some support from Surinamese opposition groups in the Netherlands: a few weapons, some money, and now and then another couple of mercenaries. The French authorities, who did not support the Jungle Commando, tolerated the presence of some guerrillas near St. Laurent for rest and recuperation. This grudging support from the outside world, the many months of waiting, and the lack of success all took their toll on the morale of the rebel army. Of the approximately 1,500 Jungles²⁵ who took part in the early battles in the fall of 1986, fewer than 200 were left by the time we first visited their strongholds of Langatabiki and Stoelmanseiland in the summer of 1987.²⁶ Their numbers would shrink even more as young men grew bored and returned to their villages or to their jobs in French Guiana. By 1989, fewer than 40 Jungles remained active in the Eastern Theater. Disillusioned, they turned to Agedeonsu, while Brunswijk began to seek an accommodation with his former enemy, the military commander Bouterse. Between 1989 and 1992 very little actual combat took place.

Notes

¹ The Matawai and Kwinti did not participate in the rebellion. Most of them are Christians, but that does not seem to have been the reason for their refusal to participate. Many Christian Saamaka took an active part in the fighting. In the later years of the civil war Bouterse succeeded in recruiting some Matawai for a paramilitary unit that supported his cause.

² As a benchmark we used Price's (2002) carefully reasoned estimates of the Maroon population in Suriname and French Guiana at the beginning of this century.

- ³ "Traditional" is a curious term when applied to Maroon societies, which were created by refugees from the plantations and later Runaways. We should not forget that the norms and values that guide Maroon elders in the interior today are to a large extent part of a package of innovations introduced by a small group of religious entrepreneurs such as Da Saka who were working under the pressure of new economic forces at the turn of the twentieth century (see chapter 4).
- ⁴ Probably once and still used for Ndyuka religious purposes.
- ⁵ Max Belfort and Mikael Dapaw are our main informants for this particular point.
- ⁶ Max Belfort, personal communication, 21 March 2001.
- ⁷ "To lose one's rag," is "to lose one's temper" (*The Chambers Dictionary* 1993:1422).
- ⁸ André Pakosie, who now resides in the Netherlands, was one of the obiyaman to whom concerned Jungles turned. He also informed us about Thoma's earlier iconoclastic acts. Thoma may also have been inspired by a much older Maroon tradition of cutting off the heads of slain enemies. In 1775, Stedman (1988/1790:406–407), an officer in the expeditionary force fielded to destroy the Aluku Maroons, had this report after the fall of a rebel Maroon town in the Cottica region: "But here we Also found Something of a Different Nature. Viz. 3 Skulls upon Stakes Which were part of the Relicts of our own People formerly kill'd,—& What Surprised us 2 Negro heads Which had the Appearance of to be fresh Cutt Off, (. . .)"
 - ⁹ "If it was so ancient, how come we didn't hear about it?" was André Pakosie's reaction.
 - ¹⁰ One wonders, could the word Amanfu have been inspired by the French *Je m'en fou!* (I don't give a shit)?
 - ¹¹ They were Baka Gadu, Dyango, and Roy Aboikoni.
 - ¹² Interview with Commandant Jopin, alias Raegan. One is reminded of Stedman's (1988/1790:405) 1775 encounter with an Aluku guerrilla believing himself to be invulnerable:

A poor Fellow trusting in his *Amulet* or *Charm*, by Which he thought himself invulnerable Advanced . . . till very near us. And having Discharg'd his Piece Walk'd off the Way he Came, to Reload with the Greatest Confidence and Deliberation, till at Last one of my men . . . With a Ball Broke the bone of his Thigh, And down he Came . . . the Soldier Went up to him instantly and Placing the Muzzle of his Musket in his Mouth, blew out his Brains. . . . So much for Priest Craft in every Country.
 - ¹³ Personal communication Kenneth Bilby. Perhaps the disastrous outcome of the guerrilla raid influenced Aluku thinking on the Jungles' ritual preparation.
 - ¹⁴ As happened to us, in June 1962, when we had an opportunity to join such a pilgrimage that started at the village of Tabiki and proceeded to Kiyookondee, in historical lore the first Ndyuka village on the Tapanahoni River, where the ancestors of the war of independence were honored. When the proper rites were concluded we continued the trip to Diitabiki, to salute Gaan Tata. We recorded this pilgrimage in a film named *Visiting Deities* (Thoden van Velzen 1965).
 - ¹⁵ This gaan kuutu's decision was arrived at in Puketi on 8 April 1978.
 - ¹⁶ Nearly all of the fighting took place at the edge of the rain forest, not far from the coastal plain, and some 250 kilometers from Diitabiki, as the crow flies.
 - ¹⁷ The Jungles had set fire to several government buildings and a palm oil processing plant.
 - ¹⁸ We were not present at this meeting at Gaan Tata's oracle. In October 1986 we reconstructed the oracular session from accounts of its participants, most of them sympathizers with the Jungle Commando. In 1987, when we visited Diitabiki, we were in a position to corroborate most of what we learned while interviewing people who either were not involved in the conflict or who leaned toward the military's point of view.
 - ¹⁹ Interview with Michael Dapaw, July 15–16, 1993.
 - ²⁰ In April 1978, in Bilosei Puketi, and again in October 1980 in Peetoondoo.
 - ²¹ Alibonnet himself had a closer relationship with the Ampuku pantheon, as have other followers of the Ogii tradition. But for all Ndyuka, and most other Maroons as well, Kumanti obiya are the best medicine one can have for healing and fighting.

- ²² On the bad effects of salt for Africans, see Field (1937:8), Schuler (1980:96), Turner (1975:61), and Wooding (1981:87).
- ²³ In response to our questions about Bouterse's obiya, Mikael could only tell us that everybody—Creoles and Businengee—knew that the man would never have survived without powerful obiya, and that these were procured in Haiti.
- ²⁴ In a few cases a fury may operate if the interests of a stranger (someone who is not a Ndyuka) have been seriously damaged. Cases are known of river transporters who, in a violent argument with their employer, killed him. The ghost of their former employer then started to haunt the families of the boat owners.
- ²⁵ André Pakosie's estimate of the number of Jungles in October 1986, when most of the fighting took place in Moengo and near Albina.
- ²⁶ Max Belfort, responsible for the provisioning of the Jungle Commando, estimated their casualties as a result of fighting at less than 50. Another 50 died as a result of accidents, malaria, and other diseases.

Doing Anthropology among the Ndyuka

ON RESISTANCE TO ANTHROPOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Being an alien outsider in a village society is often difficult and frustrating until some sort of acceptance is achieved. Our first months of fieldwork among the Ndyuka were far from successful; uninvited, we had walked over to the Gaan Tata oracle, and although we were seated in the outer row among the children, Sa Kaabu did not want us to be present at all. Neither, we surmise, did anybody else. In chapter 3 we related the elegant way in which we were removed from what was at the time the Sanhedrin¹ of Ndyuka society. And indeed, why should these people have welcomed us? Why should they have wanted two strangers, two persons whose behavior and skin color represented a hostile world, to take notes when some of their most intimate secrets were openly discussed? The widespread assumption that one can settle among strangers and record their private thoughts and affairs without at least engendering their reservations, and most probably their objections, is wrong everywhere—including in Suriname, among the Ndyuka.

Nothing had prepared us for the determined type of opposition we met when we asked what we considered simple questions or when we raised subjects that we, at that time, considered fairly innocuous. To

give one example: During the 1960s Bakaa like ourselves wishing to visit the Gaanman at Diitabiki were expected to spend the night in Puketi, which was a gesture of courtesy. We knew that Puketi had been the residence of the Paramount Chiefs for the first seventy years after independence. When the village elders greeted us and started a conversation, we remarked that it was a great honor for us to be allowed to stay the night in such an ancient village. Our statement caused panic. The elders started excusing themselves; they suddenly remembered they had other pressing engagements or chores to complete before nightfall. Later, we understood that they had interpreted our polite remarks to be dangerous opening moves in a conversation that could lead to disclosures about the history of the Ndyuka and perhaps bring them to the point where we would press them to reveal the names of their ancestors. What made our interlocutors even more distressed, we later realized, was that these dreaded conversations would have taken place in public, with neighbors and kinsmen pricking up their ears.

Two weeks later, in Diitabiki, something even more disconcerting took place. The ten-year-old son of our host and hostess, and a few of his age-mates, were playing with an imitation carry oracle, shouting sentences that they had probably overheard at Gaan Tata's shrine. All of a sudden, our hostess stopped sweeping the surroundings of her house, dropped her brush, and admonished her son to be careful with his words. "Never reveal our secrets to the Bakaa," she declared openly, thinking that we would not understand her words.

When, four months later, we were admitted to the oracle, a number of conditions had changed. We were no longer total strangers. We could express ourselves in Ndyukatongo—at least people understood what we were saying. The Ndyuka around us began to see us as individuals with distinctive virtues and vices, or, to put it differently, we had become predictable persons. We had also turned into an asset for some people: we employed no less than five persons from the local community, most of them related to Gaan Tata's priests or to Gaanman and High Priest Akontu Velanti. No doubt, the gainful employment we provided for members of Akontu's family and his close associates counted heavily toward his open support of our work; Akontu was not the kind of person who would lose sight of material interests. But something else had happened as well.

After many weeks of knowing that scores of cases were discussed everyday at Gaan Tata's oracle without our being allowed to come within earshot, we finally decided to put the future of our anthropological work in the hands of the Gaanman. "Father," we addressed him, "we put our future in your hands; we cannot stay here much longer while everything of importance is being discussed at the oracle where we are not welcome." Akontu then turned to his counselors and said: "You have heard what these people are saying. What they want from

us are '*nengee toli*' [lit. Negro stories]. They have understood that to get the stories right, they need to sit down with Gaan Tata. These Bakaa are showing respect. In the future they will have my full support. From now on they will join us in our important work." And to us he said: "Indeed, you are beginning to learn polite speech, the way civilized people phrase a request."

Why did the Gaanman decide to openly back us? From a financial point of view, Akontu's family benefited from the employment opportunities we provided. But just as important was the deference we showed by putting our fate in his hands. From that moment on, Akontu supported us whenever and wherever he could, even in places where he had nothing to gain by helping us. For example, he asked, almost begged, Agedeonsu's priests to accept our presence at their oracle (see below).

Akontu's decision meant that we could make notes on a regular basis of the cases brought before Gaan Tata. Although we had worked hard on Ndyukatongo, we still understood less than half of what was being said. To get a better picture of the discussions between Gaan Tata and the supplicants, we employed the services of Da Akuden Velanti, the High Priest's son. After a session, he would present us with a summary of each of the cases brought before the oracle on that particular day. Many of these cases had a history—they previously had been submitted to the oracle or had been the topic of a village or tribal council. Akuden's reports were thus absolutely vital to our understandings.

Being welcome at the oracle meant we could interview Captains and village elders throughout the Tapanahoni region. But it did *not* mean they were obliged to give us information about their kin groups or villages. Only a handful of elders gradually turned into our teachers, that is, people who were willing to inform and explain to us their religious beliefs and their history. Yet here, too, the limits of information gathering were clearly drawn. Some of our friends were quite candid about withholding information: "Look, one lesson we learned from the past is that even your best friend shouldn't know where you hide your powder flask." Or as Price (1983:14) put it for the Saamaka, "knowledge is power . . . one must never reveal all of what one knows."

Having a passport for the Gaan Tata oracle was no guarantee that we could attend consultations at other Ndyuka oracles. A year after being granted permission to be present at the Diitabiki oracle, we accompanied Gaanman and High Priest Akontu on his trip to the Agedeonsu oracle at the village of Tabiki. Upon our arrival, Agedeonsu's priests ordered a sort of house arrest for us: we could go to the boat landing for bathing or to meet with local people, but under no circumstances where we to come near Agedeonsu's temple. Akontu then implored the Tabiki priests to allow us to pay homage to their god. This became the subject of a long palaver. Finally the priests reached the decision that Agedeonsu was ready to receive our apologies for

coming so close to his tabernacle—if we paid a fine. We handed over twelve bottles of rum, six pangi, and an enormous Dutch flag. After these were accepted, Agedeonsu considered that the terms for a peace treaty had been met. We were allowed to attend the oracular sessions and to accompany Agedeonsu on his trip to Kiyoo Kondee, a village abandoned some two centuries ago and now a place of pilgrimage (Thoden van Velzen, 1965).

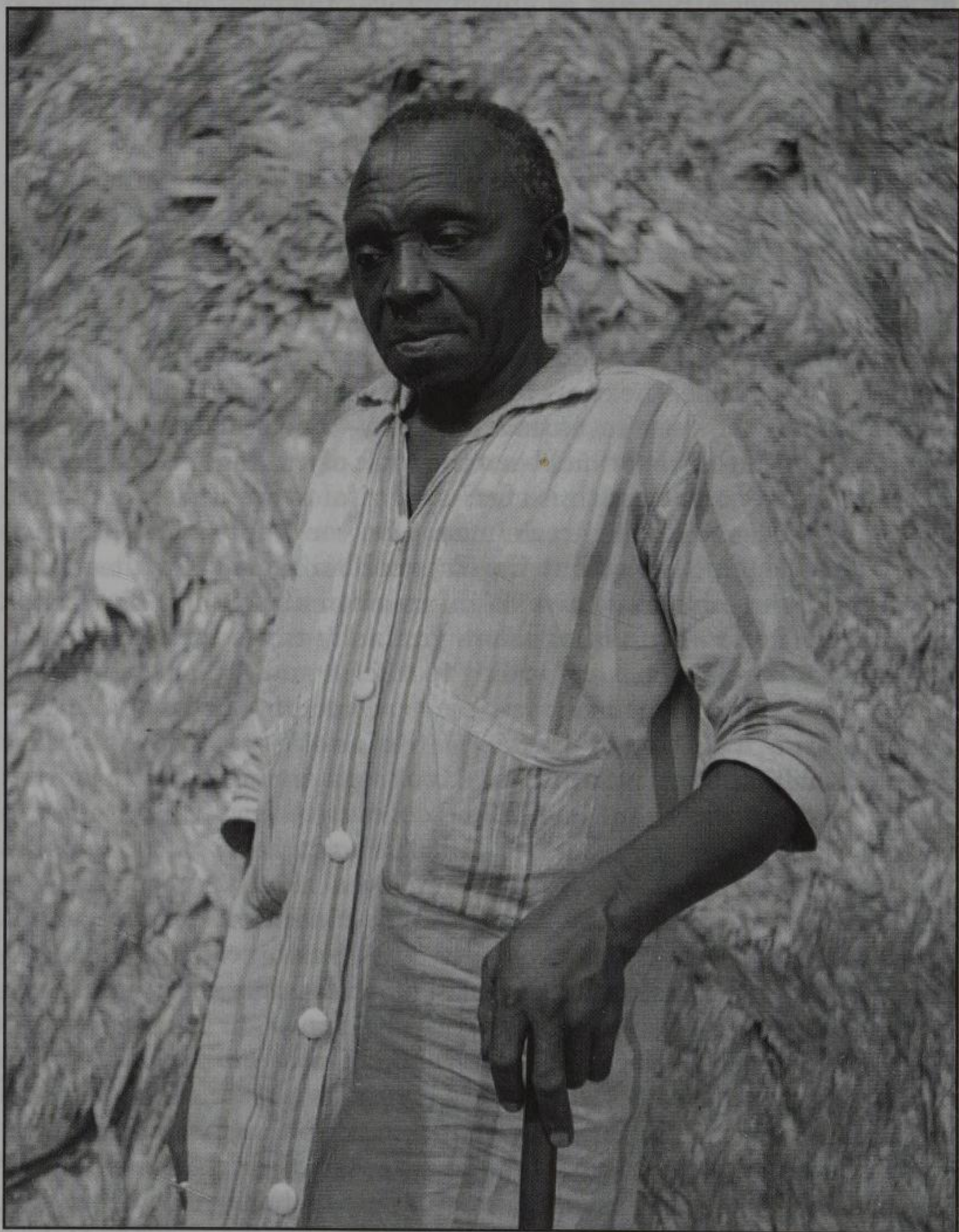


Figure 26 Da Akontu.

LECTURES

Much of our knowledge came to us in the form of lectures. After being employed by us for some time, Akuden announced one day that we should take our notebooks and write down some basic information on Ndyuka religion. In a systematic manner, very much in the way a university professor would do it, he presented us with an account of the four main pantheons of the lesser spirits (Papagadu, Kumanti, Ampuku, and Yooka), the relationships of these gadu to Gaan Tata and Agedeonsu, and finally, what relationships all of these supernaturals had to Masaa Gadu, the Supreme Deity. During four decades we have seen no reason to change the basic contours of that information.

What Akuden gave us were the tenets of Ndyuka religion, but large areas of knowledge were still to be opened. Some ten years later, Akalali saw no problem in setting out before us the basics of Ogi's world. In contrast to almost everybody else, Akalali considered the dissemination of information on this religious domain an essential part of his assignment. He was making poopokanda (propaganda), he explained. Again, many years later, André Pakosie presented us with some detailed accounts of the life of Dikii. All of this simply fell into our laps, a welcome relief from our routine struggle for tiny bits and pieces of knowledge.

NDYUKA HISTORIANS

Ndyuka historians are those who are known and admired throughout their society for their knowledge of the past. Although much of that learning is specific to locality and kin group, a reputation as a historian can be gained only by those who have succeeded in collecting information about events that are considered crucial to the development of the Ndyuka nation as a whole. To offer one example: all historians are expected to have obtained special knowledge on the Ndyuka-Aluku war of 1793, regardless of whether their own clans took part in the hostilities.

The reputation of historians is built on their private tutorials and on whatever transpires from these sessions. But no historian who gives away his knowledge in lectures in front of the general public is respected. Historians are primarily judged by their command of facts: Ndyuka believe in facts. A historian who, for example, exaggerates the number of enemies slain in the short war with the Aluku would fall from his pedestal. When two historians meet, and when they are guaranteed to have an audience, inevitably a clash occurs that assumes the form of examinations. "Pray tell me, who accompanied Akule when he was crowned as King of the Cottica?" If the colleague who is being tested cannot reproduce the names of all the elders who were part of

Akule's retinue, his reputation is dented, and this news is bruited about in many a village palaver.²

We had the good fortune of working on a regular basis with Da Asawooko, a historian of the Misidyan clan. When we returned from a visit to other villages, he used to ask what we had learned from our conversations. We remember one occasion when we returned from a visit to someone who enjoyed the reputation of being a historian. At that time we were busy reconstructing the life of Da Labi Agumasaka. Initially people had told us that Da Saka was a member of the Otoo clan, the clan that appoints the Gaanman. But the historian we met

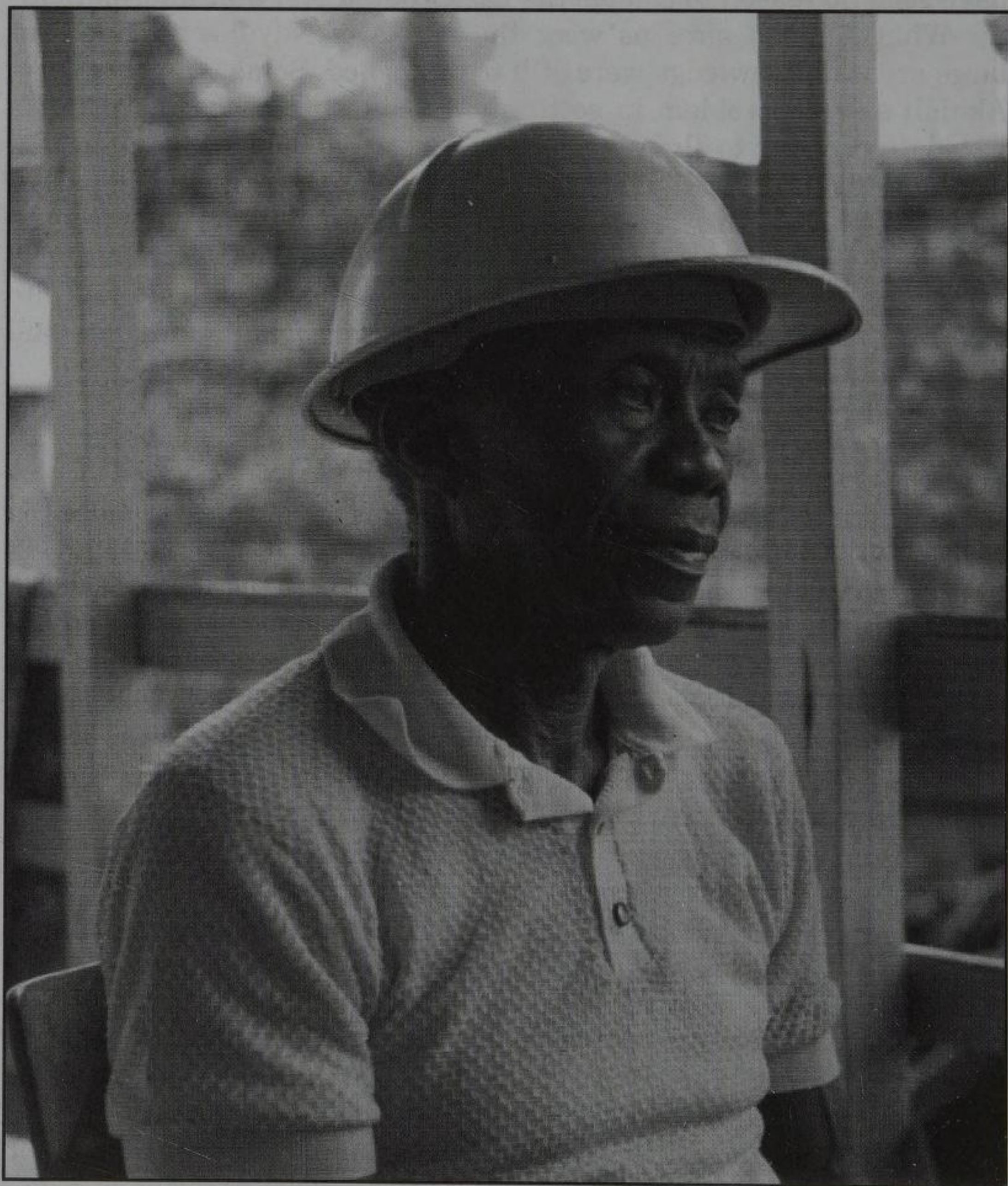


Figure 27 Da Asawooko.

insisted that Saka was a Misidyan, a member of the most important clan in terms of villages and the most prestigious one after the Otoo. We were happy to share this information with Asawooko. His response was far from reassuring: "So *Meneri*³ and *Missi*" (not using our first names, but instead using terms appropriate for an encounter with any Bakaa with whom he was unfamiliar, meant that he was annoyed) "do you believe that? Well, if you believe everything people are telling you there is little purpose in my correcting it, now, is there?" After a pained silence he resumed with: "Next time they are telling you this nonsense, ask them from what Misidyan lineage Saka was a member. Ndyuka people do have lineages you know! But I never heard of any Misidyan claiming that Saka belonged to his lineage."

Asawooko's instruction proved to be useful. We were on good terms with quite a few Misidyan, but none of them could mention Saka's matrilineage. This is how we discovered that Saka, the most powerful man in Ndyuka history, could not lay claim to membership in one of the original Twelve Clans. When we had done some more research, Asawooko disclosed the astounding information that Saka's mother was a bakabusi sama (backwoods person, one who descends from those who escaped slavery after the peace treaties). In 1855, or shortly after, when Saka was already an adult, Ma Dyemba, priestess of the Sweli Gadu cult and an Otoo, adopted him as her foster son.

TUTORIALS FROM HISTORIANS

In sharing their knowledge of history with us, Akuden, Akalali, Asawooko, and Pakosie deviated sharply from the traditional oral-history instruction. That practice has been described in detail by Pakosie (1989) and Price (1983:8–11). Here we will present only a rough outline. The prospective student of Ndyuka history sends a politely worded request to the historian, asking him to become his teacher. When the answer is positive, the student is told what day he is expected to arrive at the historian's village. On that first day, he meets his future teacher, briefly. The conversation is limited to polite inquiries about each other's health. It is only after he has slept at least one night in his teacher's village that instruction can begin. Early, at least an hour before daybreak, the tutor sends a messenger, usually a young boy, to his pupil's house. While the village is still asleep, the pupil walks over to the teacher's house, and instruction begins in the form of a monologue. The pupil is not supposed to interrupt his teacher with questions. Such tutorials provide foundational knowledge for an aspiring historian. To paraphrase Price (1983:10), this "cock's crow" instruction is the classic setting for the formal transmission of knowledge.

During the 1960s it was well-nigh impossible to collect any historical information at all from Ndyuka historians; they simply were not

willing to discuss their society's past with the Bakaa. This changed dramatically during the 1970s and 1980s, when we found several elders willing to impart their professional knowledge to us. A foremost historian, Da Kasiayeki of Godoolo, practically implored us to visit him in his village. Our last meeting took place shortly before his death in 1989. The "interview" proceeded according to tradition. Early one morning (it was still dark outside) a young boy shook our hammocks telling us "the father is waiting for you." We stumbled through the night to Kasiayeki's house. "Take those chairs and listen to what I have to tell you. This is what I have to tell you. [Long pause] I have been on the high seas for a long time. One day, when I take some fresh air on the deck, look what happened! The ocean had changed its color: it was no longer blue, it is green. And look, that bird! I have never seen such a bird before. The world is changing." He stopped there and said: "It is a pity we met so late in life. Most of my memory is already gone. The young men in this village are not interested in my stories. They are lost forever. I once knew what happened when we made our land-fall. I can no longer tell you." Fortunately for us, in previous years Da Kasiayeki had shared his knowledge of some important moments in Ndyuka history with us (see p. 43 and Hoogbergen 1990:172).

SOME PROBLEMS WITH THE TRANSFER OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

The first and most obvious obstacle to the anthropologist who wishes to gain a historical perspective is the circumstance that very few historians are willing to accept Bakaa as their pupils. This is hardly different from the general aversion to informing the former enemy about the customs of the Ndyuka people. Many an elder stuck with the wisdom of the ancestors might say (Pakosie 1989:2): "*yu á mu fiya a Bakaa*" (you mustn't trust the Bakaa), or "*Bakaa, na kawkaka, a gaandi a doo a lala a ini*" (Bakaa, like cow shit, are dry on the outside, but fresh on the inside). Appearances are deceptive, this proverb says. Here again the Ndyuka are reminded not to trust the Outsiders.

Even after the anthropologist has developed a relationship with knowledgeable persons, other problems present themselves. Two areas where difficulties are likely to arise are knowing how to elicit information and determining its meaning.

If the anthropologist is interested in a specific historical event, how does one ask the right questions? We spent a long time trying to reconstruct the origins of the Gaan Tata cult. We knew from what the Ndyuka had told us that Saka was the founder of a new religious movement, one known under the name of Gaan Gadu or Gaan Tata. The missionaries in their journals mentioned the same phenomenon, and although written from the periphery of Ndyuka territory (Cottica, Sara

Creek, and lower Saramacca), those journals allowed us to put a date on the birth of the new cult. It happened before 1892, because envoys from Saka brought the news of this development to these places in 1892 and 1893. But when we asked people questions like, "What caused Da Saka to launch this movement?" the answer usually was something like: "You know, Da Saka was one of the greatest figures in Ndyuka history. People of his stature are wont to set big things in motion." Then one day, when we asked Da Amatali, Saka's grandson, the same question again, he mumbled something almost unintelligible (he had lost most of his teeth) that sounded like, "It all started with Coba." But he stopped there. A few hours later, when we met with Asawooko, we asked him what this business with Coba was all about. Asawooko's answer opened a new chapter of Ndyuka history for us: "Oh, you want to know about Sa Coba; why didn't you ask me before? My own mother saw all of it. It was a big thing." And then followed a long story. Other Ndyuka elders also had no problem explaining to us what role this Coba, this woman who died young, played in Ndyuka history. But that was only after we had found the key to the story: the name "Coba."

The second problem is of a different nature. Facts do not simply speak for themselves but require interpretation, a task left to the pupil whether he be an anthropologist or a native son. Two Gaanboli historians, Da Amatali and Da Amoikudu (Saka's grandsons), related to us on different occasions that one day Saka received a message from Gaanman Oseyse that he should subject himself to the Coba oracle, but their grandfather refused to do so. They then continued with an account of Saka's journey from Gaanboli to Diitabiki. In almost boring detail we were told not only of every village where Saka stopped on his journey but even of the boat landings (villages often have several) as well. Added was a long list of the persons he met and what they told him, which was always: "Father Saka, you should submit yourself to the Coba oracle." This repetitive and somewhat tedious account of Saka's journey seemed superfluous to us, until we realized that it dramatically underlined the message. What these two historians were trying to get across was the traumatic nature of that journey: Around 1890, Saka had been the most powerful man in Ndyuka history, but because of the developments after Coba's death, Saka began to understand that he had lost control. A new oracle ruled the Ndyuka. Saka's own obiya was yesterday's story; he knew himself as a "has been." His Gaanman had deserted him. His former contacts and friends had all gone over to the enemy, to that small group of gravediggers who rode herd on the Ndyuka people. That is why Da Amatali and Da Amoikudu gave us the long list of villages, boat landings, and people their grandfather met at these places.

The stress on facts has not made oral history a dour pursuit. On the contrary, as the above account illustrates, a sheer repetition of "facts" serves as a rhetorical device to evoke an underlying personal

drama. Although not made explicit, the art of allusion is creatively used here. The expressive, dramatic quality of Maroon life, highlighted by Price and Price (1980:167–168), is as manifest in oral history as it is in other forms of conveying events. Although gradually our confidence grew that we had at least managed to gain a foothold in Ndyuka lore, we felt we did not know all we wanted to know. Open and intriguing questions remained. For instance, who was the slain Dutch officer who inspired Kaabu and her predecessors? There must have been a historic figure whose angry shade—aggrieved by an untimely death in a desolate and inimical wilderness—had to be appeased and whose memory was celebrated by the flamboyant young medium,

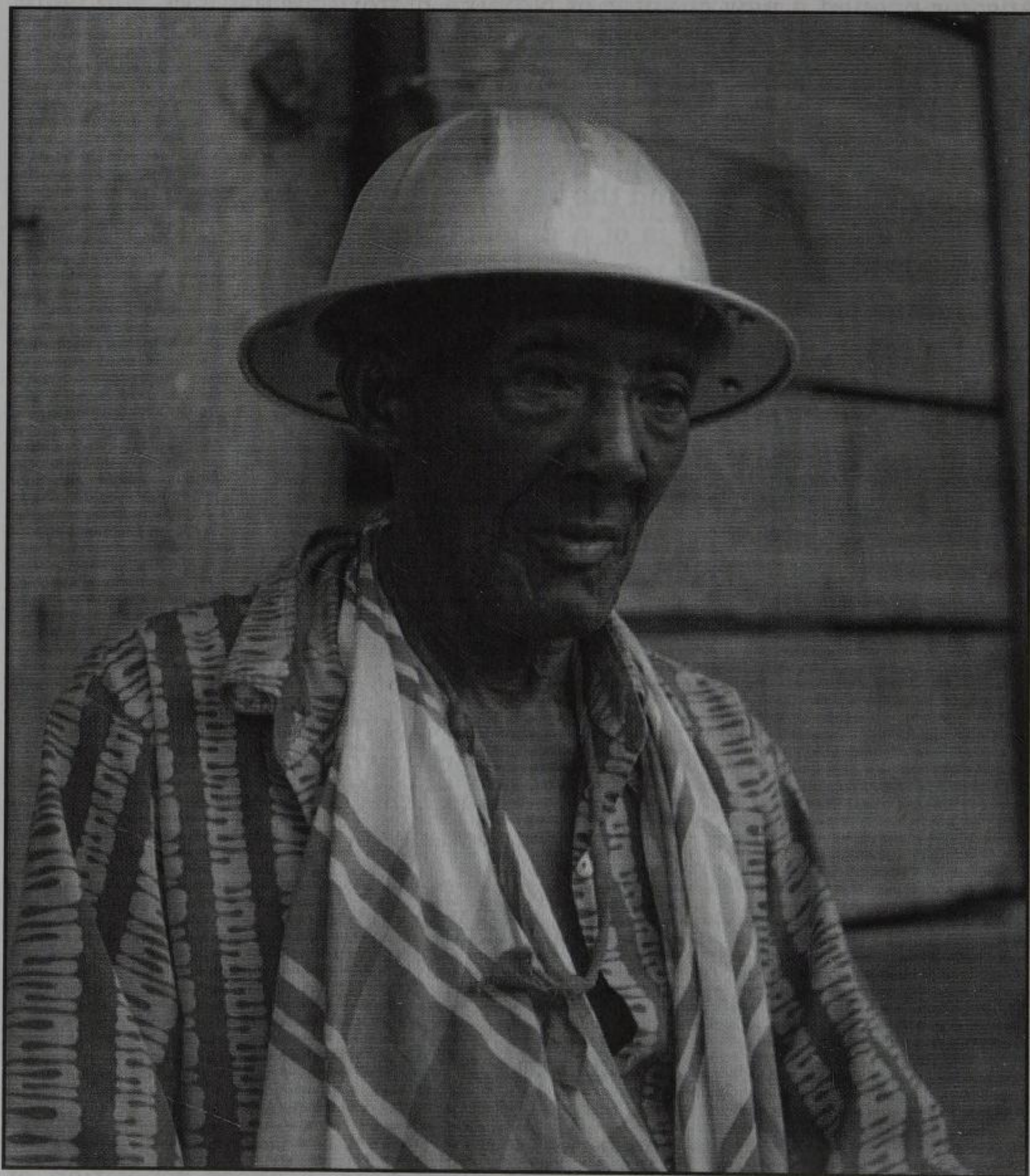


Figure 28 Da Amatali.

spewing forth curses in Dutch, which perhaps had been picked from the mouth of an employer dissatisfied with the performance of Ndyuka migrant laborers. Was the slain officer an enemy in the guerilla wars of the eighteenth century, or was he one of the pursuers of Runaways in a later stage of history? We simply do not know, and we have no lead for further research.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL CENSORSHIP

We gained our anthropological knowledge within a wider field of relationships shaped by historical forces (the years of brutal slavery, the deprivations during the great escape into the rain forest) and by the continuing power relations between the city of Paramaribo and the interior. Overshadowing the often mutually profitable relations Ndyuka have with the Bakaa is the fear that one day the Outsiders will return and enslave them again. In fact, during the civil war, and especially in 1986, after the killings at Moiwana of some forty Ndyuka women and children, we heard Ndyuka say: "You see, *katibo ten* (slavery time) has returned. Soldiers with guns are killing our people. This is what our ancestors always warned us to expect." For many Ndyuka the first history lesson is that Outsiders are to be distrusted—no matter if they are from Suriname, the Netherlands, or elsewhere, or if they are black or white, it makes no difference. Furthermore, despite the difficulties we experienced during the early months of our fieldwork, we gradually began to appreciate these deep-seated feelings of suspicion. The Ndyuka people had every reason to mistrust the Bakaa, and we had to work within that environment, trying to expand gradually the area of mutual understanding and to build up an island of confidence. Within that arena our interlocutors held all the cards: they were the ones who would decide whether the time had come to reveal a little bit more of Ndyuka history and culture.

Our fieldwork was also deeply influenced by our own emotional reactions to certain aspects of Ndyuka culture. Two areas in particular presented problems to us. The first was the way Ndyuka, especially Ndyuka men, behaved in social transactions. Soon after our arrival, we noticed that the men preferred to use diplomatic speech and behavior rather than plain and honest talk. Before embarking on fieldwork, the writings of many colonial officers had often annoyed us, as they characterized the Ndyuka as "deceitful," "sly," "underhanded," and "hypocritical." But once living in Ndyuka villages, we, too, sometimes felt surrounded by insincere people who never showed their true feelings. André Köbben, after his stint of fieldwork in Cottica Ndyuka society, had this lesson for us: "If you want to know who among the people around you hate each other, watch their accolades; those who most warmly embrace each other are mortal enemies." In palavers, for

instance, Ndyuka notables would enthusiastically welcome a move by the High Priest to impound the estate of a deceased kinsman. Only later, in the privacy of their houses, would they vent their anger. The apparent hypocrisy could go very far, but it was nearly always much more complicated than simple dishonesty. It often was a double-layered signal to the public. A dramatic example from the past can illustrate this.

In 1921, posthouder Willem van Lier explained to a gaan kuutu in Diitabiki how the colonial authorities had given Amaketi, then Gaanman of the Ndyuka, a public dressing-down in Paramaribo. Amaketi had been one of the organizers of a highly popular strike of the river transporters. After some deliberations, the response from the palaver was that they thanked van Lier most warmly and on their knees: seldom had they heard such wonderful words being spoken in a kuutu. The spokesman for the palaver added: "No Ndyuka would say such things in public." The abundant praise was meant as ironic; by exaggerating the opposite they were underlining their disapproval. Van Lier, however, interpreted this response from the gaan kuutu as highly complimentary. The future would reveal the full extent of the anger of Ndyuka at the abusive behavior of this official (Thoden van Velzen 2003:106–112). Van Lier never regained a favorable reputation among Ndyuka.

It took us a few months, but our initial reactions to Ndyuka public behavior began to change. Instead of finding fault with the appearance of insincerity, we began to be impressed by such qualities as courtesy, good manners, and the skillful way in which public debate was managed with attention given to all sides and unnecessary conflict avoided. We gradually began to feel at ease among Ndyuka and to see their world as exemplifying the contours of a unique civilization (Thoden van Velzen 1984).

Nevertheless, moot points remained. Ndyuka burial customs, for instance, were difficult to stomach. It was a scary and disconcerting experience for us when a corpse was carried away in a bed sheet to be abandoned in the forest and our neighbors asked us to remain indoors until the boat carrying the body was out of sight. The public display of hatred directed at the deceased was another most vexing experience. Mother So-and-So, whom we knew as a friendly neighbor, a decent person greatly appreciated by the neighborhood, was suddenly, now that she was dead, transmogrified into a monster. People who had been on the best of terms with her now condemned her evil deeds with such intensity that it frightened us. How could we feel at home in a society where people acted this way, changing attitudes so abruptly and voicing such feelings? It seemed we had ended up in a horrible world with nightmarish qualities.

Then one day, we decided to express our dismay to one of our best friends, Da Asawooko. His response was no less than surprising.

"Don't think that all of us Ndyuka believe these things. When my mother died, people said she was a witch. Gaan Tata's priests said they knew for certain my mother planned to slowly pervert me to become a witch myself. Do you really think I believed them? The mother who had sucked me at her breast had had every opportunity in the world to try her witchcraft on me. It was the family who invented this story. They could easily do so because she was so isolated; she had no sisters or brothers and only one child. So they carried her away like a piece of trash, and I had to act as if I believed them. Had I not done so they would have started the rumor that I appeared to love witches. So I joined in the spitting on her corpse, my own mother's corpse!"

During the 1960s, Asawooko seemed to be an odd man out. Most people seemed to support fully the hunt for witches and did not appear to be surprised when their neighbors or kinsmen, after their deaths, suddenly turned out to be criminal figures. But then came Akalali's revolution, and with it a complete change of heart. Now our friend Asawooko was no longer an isolated figure. People openly discussed their misgivings about the religious regime that had dominated their lives. One of the oracle's regular bearers volunteered that he had had deep misgivings about what they had been doing: "We were dumping all these corpses in the forest, the same forest where wild boars roam. Do we believe these animals don't eat human flesh? Of course they do, and then what happens? We shoot these boars, eat their delicious meat and at the same time ingest the wisi of the person the boar had been eating!" Other Gaan Tata stalwarts were even more straightforward in their condemnation of what had happened in the past. According to them the Gaan Tata oracle and its laws had once been a good thing. Only much later did things go wrong. The priests were willing to find fault with themselves, while at the same time laying most of the blame at the door of the family of the deceased. The prevailing opinion among the old priests was that jealousy and hatred among close kin were responsible for the majority of false verdicts.

In 1974 Akalali took us on a guided tour to Saantigoon. When we came to the sacred dump, one of his deputy priests looked at us and asked: "What do you make of this? Remember this was Gaan Tata's most sacred place. Now look what he in his greed collected." And then came the rhetorical question: "What does this remind you of?" We had to answer the question ourselves. The answer was wisi—greed being the driving force of all witches. Gaan Tata had fallen to the same lows as all these wisiman, Gaan Tata was the arch witch!

Although over the last ten years several villages have quietly resumed the practice of corpse divination, the resistance against the rebirth of the Gaan Tata cult is considerable. People are quite vocal in pointing out that a renaissance of the old regime would undoubtedly bring back the old abuses: the possessions of the deceased would be

confiscated again and the number of people condemned of witchcraft would soon rise to its old level. Hefty fees would be charged by a new generation of priests, just like their predecessors did. We are inclined to agree with the skeptics. But yet there are moments when we feel differently about the past.

Two years ago, a Ndyuka friend who has lived in the Netherlands for many years called us with the news that his mother, who had stayed behind in her Tapanahoni village, had died. Mistrusted by the other villagers, accused of witchcraft, with everybody shunning her, she had hanged herself in her own house. Had the Gaan Tata oracle still been functioning, this tragic event never would have occurred because she would have brought her case before the oracle, or her accusing relatives would have taken the initiative. In either case, the result would not have been deadly: The old woman probably would have been cleared of all blame (as happened in the majority of such cases) and the accusers upbraided for irresponsible behavior. If, as sometimes happened, the priest had found the old lady guilty, not of wisi but some lesser misdemeanor, he would have fined her and warned her relatives against any attempt at usurping Gaan Tata's role, the detection of witches. That usually was enough to end such affairs.

The suicide of our friend's mother made us think again about the position of the Gaan Tata oracle. We know that our ambivalence towards the institution is shared by many other Ndyuka. On the one hand, Gaan Tata's priests often acted unjustly, but on the other hand they could be relied upon to curb certain iniquities and to create order and security. Akalali offered liberation from the inequities of Gaan Tata, but that freedom was accompanied by a period of unrest in which hardly anything could be taken for granted. At present, no institution enjoys as much prestige as the old religious regime, and many Ndyuka look back on that past with nostalgia. Some even foretold the result of their cultural revolution. As Da Asawooko expressed it: "We are like dogs without a master, and those sleep on empty bellies."

Notes

¹ "Also called Great Sanhedrin, the highest council of the ancient Jews . . . (Random House Unabridged, Second Edition, p. 1700).

² A quotation from Richard Price's *First Time* (1983: 28) about the craft of the Saamaka historian describes the situation among Ndyuka as well:

My insistent use of the model of Western scholarship in describing Saramaka historical thought is neither romanticism nor a literary device. Those men who pursue this vocation adhere to critical canons that are no less stringent than those of their Western colleagues. Dealing with oral rather than written materials, they have developed a different critical apparatus, but it is fully comparable in rigor and in general intent; both are tools toward the constructing and understanding of "what really happened."

³ From the Dutch *mijnheer*, meaning "mister" or "sir."

Epilogue

If you want to understand us Businengee, you will have to realize that, although we liked our freedom, we were and remain an unsatisfied people. We did not flee the plantations just to be tucked away in that green wilderness, the rain forest. We wanted to remain part of the greater world so that we could profit from all the wealth that world generates. (Stanley Rensch, former director of the Paramaribo-based Human Rights Organization, Moiwana 86)

We have often taken issue with accounts from social scientists that represent peripheral, (post)tribal, or traditional societies as "backward-looking." Particularly when witch hunts are organized and spirits are called upon to legitimize political action, a society is too often diagnosed as being on the defensive, as aimed at restoring the social relations and values of its past.¹ Applying such notions to the Maroon societies of the Guianas makes little sense, either to those who founded these communities or to their descendants today. Although the belief in spirit mediums and witches is just as strong now as it was a century ago, and although the protection of supernatural agencies is just as avidly sought, that does not keep Maroons from struggling for full economic participation and political rights.

Let us once more consider the evidence. Around 1700, groups of runaway slaves in Suriname's rain forest were laying the foundations for new societies. Then, as now, it would have been equally unrealistic to portray them as "a people without history" or as a "pristine survival from a timeless past," to borrow two phrases from Eric Wolf (1982:385). Organized in a novel way, incorporating cultural elements from West and Central Africa, from Amerindian communities, as well as from European nation states, Ndyuka society did not ever replicate any particular African society. Moreover, since the end of the eighteenth century, the Ndyuka have been a part of what Wallerstein (1974) called "the European World-Economy" because great numbers of their adult males participated in a colonial economy geared to overseas markets.

The active participation of Maroons in a wider economic field is of signal importance. As we argued earlier, some of the most important processes that helped shape Ndyuka religious movements are economic. Two considerations are important here: the specific nature of the work that Maroons performed (logging or cargo-transport with boats), and the effect of men's presence or absence from their villages. We discussed the social disruptive consequences of the shift from logging to the transport industry. But we did not focus attention on the consequences of the absence of men from their villages. According to Price (1970), the social position of Saamaka women deteriorated considerably as an unanticipated result of the prolonged absences of many Saamaka men; women became more dependent on the smaller number of men remaining in the tribal area. This was not the case with the Ndyuka, whose work terrain (the Marowijne-Lawa Rivers) allowed men to return to their villages with some regularity and frequency. Comprehending these factors is necessary but not sufficient for an understanding of the religious regimes that form the subject of this book. The social imageries that accompany such movements cannot be appreciated from a purely economic perspective alone. Eric Wolf (1982:390), while using a Marxist "mode of production" approach, indicated some of the shortcomings of any merely economic understanding of cultural phenomena: "Sets of ideas and particular group interests, . . . do not exist in mechanical one-to-one relationships. If a mode of production gives rise to idea-systems, these are multiple and often contradictory."

There are good reasons why these idea-systems—shared sets of ideas and emotions, or "social imageries" as we prefer to call them—are so often "multiple and contradictory." Social imageries are produced under the influence of political and economic forces, but they come under pressure from other force fields as well. First, they are promises and visions of a future that need not bear much relation to the bread-and-butter issues of the day. A substantial part of the contribution of religious virtuosos to social life is grounded in the propensity to look ahead and experiment with new opportunities. In myth and cult, prophets and their disciples explore the lure, the dangers, and betrayals of modern life. Fascination with the workings of a capitalist system, and greed rather than disinterest or aversion, have been the prevailing emotions in Ndyuka religious beliefs and ritual. To regard Ndyuka religious cults in any other way would be to sentimentalize them.

But there is a second field that shapes the religious regimes by its gravitational forces, one much more difficult to define or even to sketch. It is a cache of emotionally powerful experiences that is passed on from generation to generation. Most of this consists of strings of ideas and emotions that originated here and there in Africa; others came to life on the plantations. Let us look at a few examples of Afri-

can-derived emotional complexes: the customs of corpse divination, the removal of the possessions of witches from the human community, and the abandoning of their unburied corpses in the wilderness.² These struck us as awesome, even terrifying. Later, after Akalali's revolution, we understood that for the Ndyuka, too, these funerary institutions engender strong and often negative emotions. The collapse of the Gaan Tata cult can be partly explained by feelings of revulsion, as Ndyuka felt freed from their institutional shackles once Akalali dared openly to challenge the cult's practices. Two generations earlier, Wensi had also attempted to push such notions aside; he failed because he offered nothing to replace them. Akalali branded Gaan Tata's practices as barbaric, but offered the Ndyuka as replacement another African emotional complex: the spiritual capacity to recognize and combat witches. Such notions are well spread among the Mandinko of present-day Senegal and Gambia. When we asked Akalali how he succeeded in detecting witches, he answered: "I have a 'big head,' that's why."³ Today, any adult Mandinko would have understood his answer. Of their blacksmiths it is said that they are believed to have a "wide head," which is synonymous with saying that they have the spiritual capacity to recognize and combat witches.

Strong emotional complexes also derive from life on the plantations. When we asked Captain Kofi Atyauwkili of Mainsi to tell us about the early times, he began, after painful sighing, with "You people made us dig trenches. All day long we were digging them in the mud. The work broke our backs." Another social imagery that persists and that stems from the plantations is the fear of betrayal. Among slaves that fear was ever present. Planning flight was most dangerous: if one gave away the secret, punishment by the slave owners would be terrible. Once Runaways were settled in the interior, long after choices for or against the marronage had been committed to, a different fear crept into the minds of the free Maroons: would their relatives and neighbors live decent lives, would jealousy not lead them to plan to harm their fellows? The defensive complex of ideas and emotions that forms the poison ordeal held early sway over the Ndyuka. Even today, the significance of oath taking cannot be exaggerated. The bagasiman who organized the 1921 boat strike, or the guerrillas who fought the National Army in the second half of the 1980s, took an oath not to betray their comrades before starting on a dangerous course (cf. Thoden van Velzen 2003).

Ndyuka social imageries are attempts to grapple with modern conditions, and are beholden to the lessons of the past. Each imagery can be read as a program for understanding and changing the world while profiting from earlier experiences.⁴ But, as in all such programs, realistic assessments about the nature of the modern world alternate with ideas that betray impatience, the flight of fantasy or, in some cases, a

complete departure from common sense. To give examples on all these points for just one movement: Akalali knew that city politicians needed the Ndyuka's votes and therefore he made them pay for that political support; the prophet knew Ndyuka were dissatisfied with existing ways of fighting witchcraft, so he came up with a new one that screened a living person and did away with corpse divination. Most of all, Akalali handled the "burning" of suspects so gingerly because he knew that if people were seriously harmed, that would cause trouble for him in the capital. The idea of showing his power by giving Paramaribo a week without traffic accidents appealed to Akalali, but his followers kept him from promising it. We also remember how in 1973 Akalali forbade the Ndyuka to cut their gardens in the months of the dry season. The prohibition was not lifted until November of that year, when the rains had already set in. That was too late for the burning phase of slash-and-burn agriculture, so no planting could take place and severe food shortages resulted. In 1910, a similar prohibition by Akule caused the colonial officials to intervene and banish that prophet from the area. The colonial authorities of 1910 had no need for Akule, but because the city politicians of the 1970s considered Akalali the lynchpin to their political fortunes in the interior, they did not intervene.

Social imageries encourage disciples to try new courses of action. They are also to blame for the derailment of their following. In their early stages the movements intoxicate people with dreams of omnipotence (Ogii) or total security (Gaan Tata). Sooner or later, when it becomes apparent that cult leaders cannot deliver the goods, or ask too much in return, disappointment sets in. Each new cult, whatever the contents of its message, will soon show its ravenous face. Ogii's prophets impress on their followers that they may grab what they fancy, and that there is no Law of Nature or of God that would forbid them to exploit others. The Gaan Tata cult turned a much more moral face to its following. Yet it, too, soon changed from a protective into a parasitical institution. The god's cargoes in particular became a thorn in the flesh of most Ndyuka. When Akalali embarked on the overthrow of the Gaan Tata priesthood, his clinching argument was: "Enough tribute has been paid to the deity of Saantigoon. Glut has transformed a religious duty into a monstrosity."

The answer to the riddle of the recurrent "greediness" of Ndyuka cults should be sought in the wider political and economic field. Harris (1974:149) once argued this point in trying to make his readers understand Melanesian cargo cults: "Each snippet of savage mysticism matched a snippet of civilized rapacity. . . ." Maroons always looked at two economic systems simultaneously: their own and that shared by Suriname and French Guiana, or even the wider Atlantic world. The keys to economic success seemed to rest with the Outsiders, and both

pragmatic actions (bargaining, strikes) and religious innovation sought to guarantee that Maroons would secure their slice of that wealth. The Ndyuka did most definitely look to the future. Their social imageries, based partly on ancient myths, formed and fortified their conviction that they could reify their imagination into reality. To all intents and purposes the Suriname Maroons are part and parcel of Atlantic modernity, they belong "to that vast and intricate web of political and economic relations objectively implicating actors and collectivities on three continents in each other's histories . . . these heterogeneous, and historically contingent aggregate of local discourses and practices reflecting on, engaging, and thereby both shaping and transforming this basic structural constellation" (Palmié 2002:15). In this book we have argued that those local discourses we call "social imageries" indeed reflect and engage Atlantic modernity. As part of that engagement, social imageries interrogate other discourses within their purview. Dominant, hegemonic discourses certainly come in for scrutiny, as they seem to hold the keys to the secrets of more powerful groups. In the social imageries that are propagated by Gaan Tata's and Ogii's priests, the interrogation ends in a choice to either occupy the moral high ground or to go after the prizes that any antinomian regime appears to offer.

During the early 1980s, the prevailing mood among Ndyuka was epitomized in the words of a prominent Ndyuka elder, one who had never been among the priests of either Gaan Tata or Ogii. He responded as follows to our question of how he felt now that Akalali had gone into exile: "You know how we feel? We feel like dogs without masters. There is no one to turn to, no Gaan Tata, no Ogii, nothing. Better the Christians come and build their churches. Then at last we will have plenty of food." This reaction was not so different from that of the guerrillas who knocked on Gaan Tata's closed temple door and were upbraided for coming so late, but then were also told that the deity could do nothing for them "because the people don't believe in him any longer," or from the many village elders who journeyed to Diitabiki and asked for Gaan Tata's action against witches and received this answer: "When the vandalizers destroyed my place [Saantigoon] where were you? Now you need my help. Go back and solve your own problems." Which is exactly what some of them did, by reinstituting in their villages the corpse divination that had been prohibited by Akalali in 1973.

Yet the Ndyuka still impress many Outsiders as different, as representing an older world quaintly outdated in modern times. In the past this impression was often furthered by colonialists and missionaries, and by city politicians of the Republic of Suriname. However, it is also true that, culturally speaking, Suriname's Maroons did not fully blend into the Atlantic world for a long time. Geographic isola-

tion, and a corresponding conspiracy of secrecy against Outsiders, enabled them to retain much more autonomy than Maroons elsewhere in the New World. Earlier, we mentioned the examples of pilgrimages to Kiyoo Kondee, one of the many sacred places out of bounds to all Outsiders. The rites at such forest shrines are at the heart of a number of connected religious practices that virtually form a Maroon state religion. Massive anti-witchcraft campaigns, spirit possession cults, and oracles that are regularly and publicly consulted further enhance the effect of exotic peculiarity and inaccessibility. Quite frequently in their history, the Ndyuka have espoused ideas that must appear bizarre to most alien observers. But these do not represent evidence that they are “backward looking.”⁵ On the contrary, these ideas indicate a vibrant and viable people’s ceaseless efforts to be engaged in the larger world’s economic life *on their own terms*.

Notes

¹ To define “modern social life” as “the post-traditional order of modernity” (Giddens 1991:5, 14) is misleading. Or as Sanders (2003:339) recently wrote:

Yet no longer can we correctly suppose—indeed we never could—that “the primitive” is one step behind “the modern.” Nor, in spite of the claims to the contrary, can we rightly assume that “modernity destroys tradition” (Giddens 1994:91). Recent studies instead insist that we find ourselves—all of us—in perfectly modern settings, faced with perfectly modern conundrums. Following anthropology’s broader intellectual mandate, then, these critiques aim to deotherize “the Other.”

² Corpse divination is a practice well spread throughout West Africa. The removal of the possessions of witches from the human community is a phenomenon less mentioned in the literature. But see Jacobson-Widding (1979:234) for the lower Congo. Wim van Binsbergen was kind enough to point out to us that this practice did exist among the Manjak of Guinea Bissau (Wim van Binsbergen, personal communication, 3 September 2003)

³ Akalali literally answered: “*a ede fu mi baala pikinso*,” (my head is a little bit wide or big). We thought that he meant, “I happen to be intelligent” until we read in de Jong (2001:62) about the *kungfanunte* among the Mandinko, the blacksmiths with a “wide head,” who have the power to detect witches.

⁴ A similar line of thinking was formulated decades ago by Burridge (1995/1960:27) who used concepts such as “myth dream” or “community day-dream” to explain Melanesian religious movements.

⁵ We are in full agreement with Sanders (2003:348) when he makes the following remark: “The idea that witchcraft increases with novel political and economic arrangements is not new (e.g. Richards 1935:458–460), though it is sometimes presented as though it were.” Barbara Ward (1956:47–61) offers us another example of an anthropologist who detected this trend at an early stage.

List of Ndyuka Terms

afaaka General name for a carry oracle.

Agedeonsu One of the three High Gods of the Ndyuka; the villages of Tabiki and Nikii are home to the deity's carry oracles.

agida A tall (long) drum that is central to any Papagadu ritual (*pee*).

Aguda puu sani "Aguda removes [evil] things"; the second of the great witch-cleansing movements of the Ndyuka.

Akomwai Name for Dominiki's central shrine, his Magwenu.

Amanfu A new possessing spirit; its first medium was Wensi.

Amoitee Synonym for a Gaan Gadu gadu.

Ampuku Pantheon of forest spirits.

amusu A thorned branch; used by Wensi in exorcisms.

Anado fu Gainsa (Kofi Anado fu Gainsa) A group of Ampuku (forest spirits) brainwashed by Gaan Tata.

apenti The drum that is essential for all possession dances.

asi (Horse) medium of a ghost or spirit; as are: *gaduman*, *gadu masaa*, *wen-timan*.

awidya A fly wisk.

baa Short for baala (brother).

bagasiman River transporter(s).

bai bakuu To buy a demon.

baikoto Meat drying on smoking rack.

Bakaa Outsider (everybody who is not a Maroon or an Amerindian).

bakabusi sama "Backwoods people"; the new Runaways (after the peace treaties).

bakuu Demon.

bakuu basi A demon's master.

bangi Low stool.

basi fu a Gadu Wooko High Priest.

basi fu olo Chief of the gravediggers.

Basi Sweli Lord Sweli Gadu.

basiya A Captain's assistant.

bee "belly"; the matrilineage.

Bigi Dataa "Big Doctor"; synonym for Gaan Tata.

Bilo The downstream section of the Tapanahoni River.

boon Cleansing by fire (treatment of witches).

boto feti *Lit.* "boat fight"; a massive retaliatory action of one village against another.

buui Iron bracelet used as a protective device.

buuya A state of dys-grace, of supernatural disfavor, a state of heightened susceptibility to supernatural danger.

Coba puu sani *Lit.* "Coba removes [evil] things"; the first of the great witch-cleansing movements of the Ndyuka.

da Father, a form of respect.

dede mofu "A ghost's communication"; the message sent by the gravediggers to the Gaanman, indicating the causes of death.

den poli en "They [the witches] have spoilt him [her]."

den puubei en luku Testing, especially testing of an obiya.

den seefi meke "They made it [witchcraft] themselves"; witches.

Den Tualafu "The Twelve" [twelve clans]; synonym for the Ndyuka nation.

diingi gadu *Lit.* "drinking of God"; the oath taking, pledging not to commit witchcraft and never having done so.

diingi sweli Synonym for "diingi gadu".

faakatiki "Flagpole"; the ancestral prayer pole.

famii The bilateral consanguineous kin group.

foloku Following of a "big man" (priest or headman).

fu tapu en syen "To dress one's nakedness"; the pack of clothes covering the oracle.

fu tyai en a gandaa "To be shown to the people"; the first appearance of a new oracle or obiya in public.

Gaan Gadu gadu or **Gaan Gadu wenti** A variety of spirits considered deputies of Gaan Tata.

gaan kuutu "Great palaver"; a tribal or national council.

Gaan Tata Great Father; synonym for Gaan Gadu, Bigi Gadu, Bigi Dataa, Gwangwella.

Gaanman Paramount Chief.

Gaansama Village elders.

gaanwan osu House of the great (illustrious) dead; a temple for the prominent ancestors.

gadu bon A tree where spirits dwell.

gadu dede Killed by god, comprises both misi dede and wisi dede categories.

gadu kondée A place where the gods and prominent ancestors dwell.

gadu kuutu (1) palaver with the deity; (2) conference of the gods.

gadu lai God's cargoes; the possessions of witches and sinners confiscated by Gaan Tata.

gadu ma Spirit medium(s) [archaic].
gadu masaa *Lit.* "the God's master"; synonym for a spirit medium [archaic].
gadu pasi "God's road"; the path that connects Saantigoon's sacred dump with a boat landing on the river bank.
goo obiya Obiya to further female fecundity; synonym for "meke pikin obiya".
goon gadu The god of a certain place (genius loci).
goontapu poli Human society has been corrupted.
gwa gadu the expedition that brings god's cargoes to Saantigoon.
Gwangwella Gaan Tata's more esoteric name.

Kabiten Village Headman or Captain.
kampu A settlement without mortuary and ancestor prayer pole.
kankantii The silk-cotton tree, an abode for Papagadu spirits.
kee osu "House of crying"; the mortuary.
kefaliki Dangerous behavior.
keli Examination to separate witches and sinners from ordinary people.
kiin kondee *Lit.* "to cleanse the land"; to remove the possession of witches and sinners from the human community; also seeka kondee.
kineki Trusted assistant.
kisiman Coffin makers; the funerary association that makes a coffin in case of a Yooka dede.
kondee A village; any settlement that boasts of a kee osu and a faakatiki.
koo Cool; *en ati koo* "her [his] heart is cool"; cool stands for the opposite of fiery and warm, which is a state that brings misfortune and sickness.
Kumanti The pantheon of spirits residing in celestial phenomena and in birds and animals of prey.
kunu Avenging spirit; a fury.
kunuman Medium to a kunu.
kuutu Palaver.
kwaka Dried cassava flour, a staple of the interior.
kweyuman "Apron girl"; female adolescent; traditionally she wears a small apron (kwey).

lanti Representatives of the people; those who position themselves as neutrals in a dispute; a third party in any dispute.
leti opu sama "Those who walk upright"; meaning in Ndyuka, "those who are not witches or sinners."
loweten "The time of running away"; the time before the peace treaties.
luku lai "Inspection of the god's cargoes [gadu lai]."
lukuman Diviner.

Magdu Unknown spirit possessing Akalali's first wife.
magwenu A tree, in the branches and foliage of which spirits are trapped; a pen for evil entities.
makandi libi Cooperative, harmonious living.
mama osu pikin Matrisegment.
mangi gogo obiya *Lit.* "skinny buttocks obiya"; an obiya that protects the owner from being harmed by envious people. The obiya not only protects but attacks the envious person by shriveling his (her) buttocks.

- Masaa Gadu** The Creator God, the highest spiritual authority.
- meke pikin obiya** See goo obiya.
- misi dede** A sinner's death.
- munu osu** *Lit.* "moon house"; the menstrual seclusion hut.
- Muvungu** A subvariety of Ampuku.
- Ndyukatongo** Language of the Ndyuka.
- obiya** A supernatural medicine that has assumed a definite shape and can be distinguished from other such supernatural forces available to humans.
- obiya osu** House where obiya are stored.
- obiyaman** Shaman(s).
- Odun** High God of the Aluku.
- Ogii** "Danger," one of the three High Gods; king of the wilderness.
- Okanisi** Synonym for Ndyuka.
- oloman** Gravediggers; the funerary association of gravediggers.
- pangi** Wrap-around skirt, a female's principal garment.
- Papagadu** Pantheon of reptile spirits; synonym for Vodou.
- pee pikadu** A feast of atonement.
- pemba or mpemba** Kaoline; white (sacred) clay.
- pikiman** Speaker; someone who directs a meeting by repeating or summarizing the words of speakers and by asking questions if issues remain unclear.
- putukele** A stole, worn on festive or solemn occasions.
- seeka** A ritual preparation or treatment.
- Seeka Kondee** See Kiin Kondee.
- Seiwenti** During the 1960s a new spiritual agency, Gaan Tata's auxiliary force; in other instances, a god who aims to restore Gaan Tata to his former power.
- sende gadu** The illegitimate request to a spirit or god to harm another person as retaliation; it is considered sinful, bordering on witchcraft.
- sodoo** Upper floor of a house.
- sweli** Oath.
- Sweli Gadu** God of the Oath Taking.
- takiman** Interpreters of an oracle's movements.
- takuu sani** "Evil things"; synonym for certain instruments of witchcraft.
- Tata Ede** *Lit.* "Father [Carried on the] Head"; another name for Gaanboli's Gaan Tata oracle.
- Tongai** A subvariety of Ampuku.
- tuka** Sacred drum played at solemn funerary rites.
- tyai gaduman** Bearers of an oracle.
- Vodu** Reptile spirits; synonym for Papagadu.
- wan mama pikin** "One mother's offspring"; matrilineal segment.
- wasi en paati** Splitting off the evil side; part of all more serious forms of ritual treatment.
- wasi** Ritual bath.

wentiman Spirit medium(s); synonym for gaduman.

wisi Witchcraft.

wisiman Witch.

wookoman fu a gadu Priests, especially Gaan Tata's priests.

yeye (1) the restorer spirit, a supernatural that resembles the angel of Christian theology; it is sent to the earth for one specific task only; (2) the divine spark all human beings received but can be lost by evil deeds and thoughts and by unwise behavior.

yonkuman "Young men"; those who are not yet considered gaansama.

Yooka Ghost.

Yooka dede "Taken away by the ancestors"; a respectable death.

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obiyah = obeah?
Kimanti = Koromanti?

B. Siegel

10/04

In the Shadow of the Oracle

H. U. E. Thoden van Velzen
W. van Wetering

"This is a book about witches and possession cults, about polytheistic priests and iconoclastic prophets, about magic as a cottage industry in a modernizing Afro-American society. It relates the world of the Ndyuka, a tribe of 50,000+ descendants of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century runaway African slaves in Suriname. It names the major innovators in the 300-year-long process of evolving and adjusting their belief system."

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Writing from an ethnohistoric perspective, the authors have enviably unraveled the complexities of a belief system engrained in a community of people living in Suriname, a former Dutch colony in South America. The Ndyuka, one of the six Maroon groups in Suriname, are willing to let their decisions and lives be dominated by priests, shamans, oracles, and spirits.

During their extended period of fieldwork, Dutch anthropologists Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering were able to penetrate Ndyuka religiosity, a feat not achieved by other researchers, since the Ndyuka do not freely expose themselves to outsiders. Among the sacred and secular activities they witnessed and recorded were a witch eradication movement and Maroon oracles at work. Now, in this vibrant text, they offer readers an intimate, inside-out account of Ndyuka social imagery and ideological principles—in-depth revelations neither previously revealed to nor easily understood by others who do not share the same worldview.

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